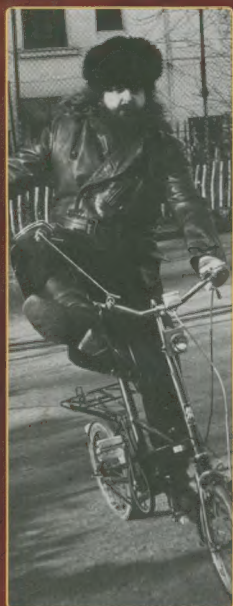


25th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

michael moorcock special

# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ♦ ISSUE 211 ♦ JUL-AUG 07 ♦ £3.75



## MICHAEL MOORCOCK

★  
THE MARCH OF  
THE WHITESHIRTS  
GUEST EDITORIAL

★  
STARING DOWN  
THE WITCHES  
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

★  
LOVERS  
EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT  
FROM THE FORTHCOMING  
MEMOIR OF MERVYN  
& MAEVE PEAKE

★  
LONDON, MY LIFE  
EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT  
FROM THE FORTHCOMING  
LONDON NOVEL

★  
THE AFFAIR OF THE  
BASSIN LES HIVERS  
SHORT STORY



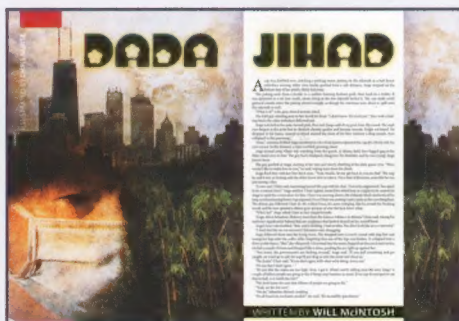
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sixshards.co.uk

COVER **LUNAR FLARE**

RICHARD MARCHAND  
richardmarchand.com





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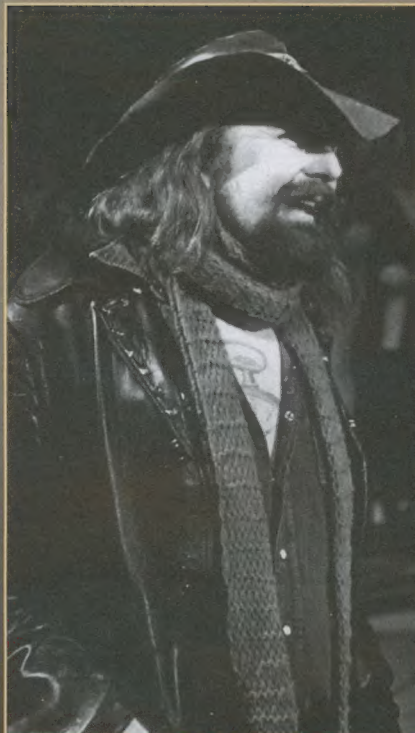
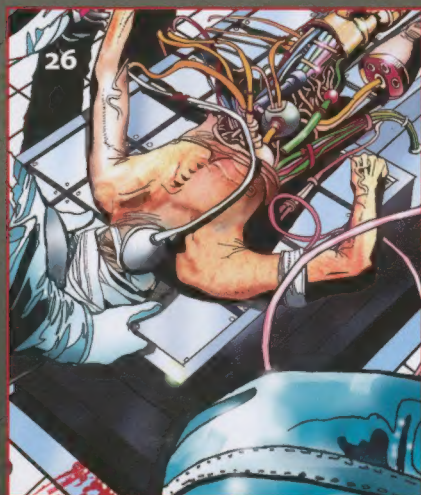
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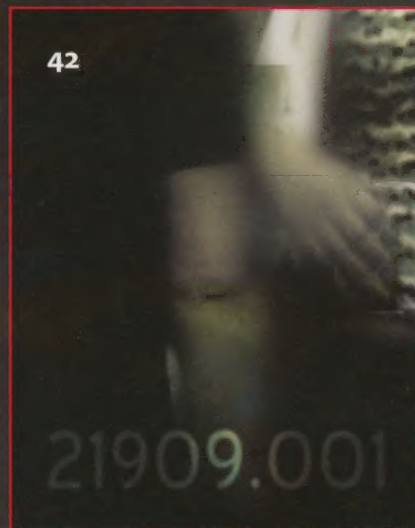
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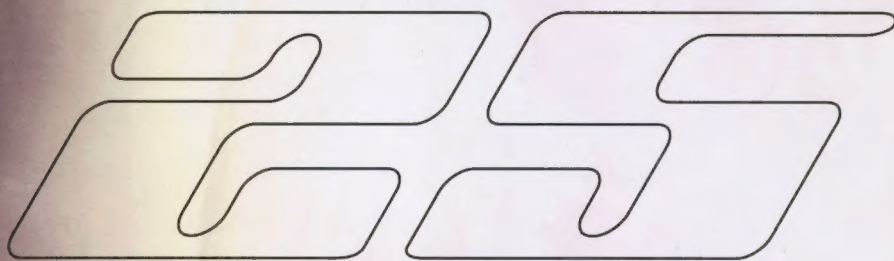
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### MANGAZONE

SARAH ASH'S REGULAR  
REVIEW OF MANGA







### JOHN PICACIO

Whatever age-defying cream *Interzone* smears on her face every morning, we should all be so lucky to have some. Not just age-defying, but age-defining in many cases. How many well-intentioned mags squeak out 25 or so noble issues, only to fold? Too many to count. How many can say that they're not only still going strong at 25 years (!) and 200-plus issues, but are as vital and relevant as ever?? Yeah, think about that. It's more than momentarily impressive. It's something to celebrate and cherish. I was fortunate to be featured and profiled in issue 204 of 'Britain's Longest Running Science Fiction Magazine'. It was a proud moment for me, not just to be associated with the magazine, but to be associated with the editors. So to you, and all of the hard-working editors, writers, reviewers, and artists that have shaped this collective dream that David Pringle started, I raise my glass. Thanks for 25 years of breaking down the walls and continuing to grow and adapt in times that, more than ever, demand it. Here's to your next 25 years of literary and graphic revolution.

### JASON STODDARD

Since I'm a relatively new 'stalwart', to use Gardner Dozois's word, I can't claim any long history with *Interzone*. Although I was certainly aware of the publication in the '80s and '90s, when I was (a) too inexperienced to write well enough to be in the mag and (b) too busy to write anything for it.

What got my attention was the first of the 'new' *Interzones*, issue 194. "Holy crap!" I thought. "This is like *Science Fiction Age*, back from the grave! Neat cover, good art, a format that immediately says 'credible magazine-kind-of-deal' to anyone who sees it!" When I saw that *Interzone* accepted longer work, I ran out and got some IRCs and sent out 'Winning Mars'. The rest...well, you know the rest.

When I first received Andy's request for an electronic copy of 'Winning Mars', my wife and I were staying in a B&B outside of Conwy, Wales. I was browsing email on my Treo, and saw Andy's name and the ttapress.com address. The fact that this was *Interzone* didn't immediately click, so I fired off a quick response saying, "Cool, thanks, but I'm on vacation, can I send it to you when I'm back in the States?" The next morning it clicked, and I spent several hours hand-wringing (as authors do) about saying, hey, Andy, I'm in the UK right now, I can have someone go to my house and get my computer and send a copy, can I buy you a pint, blah blah, what an idiot I am. But eventually, I went home, sent the electronic copy, and – there you go.

My wife and I entertain quite a bit, and we usually have an array of science fiction magazines out on the coffee-tables. It's entertaining to see our guests pick up a typical US 'pulp' magazine, leaf through it,

frown, put it down, and say something like, "Wow, I didn't know they did stuff like this anymore." On encountering *Interzone*, they open it up, sit back, and read it like the latest issue of *Town and Country*.

### PAUL DI FILIPPO

I can't pretend to have been in on *Interzone* from the very start, although the commencement of its long and lustrous 'career' coincided almost exactly with the beginnings of my own uncertain and wan one. In 1982, when *Interzone* was born, I had just quit my day job and buckled down to writing, striving to become the freelance author I had always imagined myself to be *in utero*. Three years would pass before my first professional sales occurred.

Somewhere in that desert of striving, I was browsing the racks of New York City's Forbidden Planet, the branch opposite the Strand Bookstore, then a rich resource of actual books and comics, rather than the toys and videogames that eventually came to fill its shelves. On a spinner rack, marked down to twenty-five or fifty cents, was an early issue of *Interzone*. Always eager for new markets, I snatched it up. I cannot now lay my hands on the zine, numbered about issue 30 or so, but I recall its cover rather well: a canary yellow background with an ink illustration, rather Beardsleayn, I seem to remember. Plainly, this was not your typical SF zine. Reading its canny contents, rich with 'radical hard SF' promise, confirmed my first impression.

Armed with an address, I began to submit stories. And before too long, editor David Pringle proved daft enough to buy some. He was followed in this lunacy by the new editors. Blame them.

I have always experienced a keen excitement upon seeing a story of mine in *Interzone*. It always feels, to an American, like getting published in an alternate continuum, where fantastical literature matters in a different way than in the USA. I'm breathing the same air as Wells and Peake. And that's a heady atmosphere indeed!

Long may *Interzone* run!

### ERIC BROWN

It's 21 years since David Pringle bought what was to be my very first published short story, 'Krash-Bangg Joe and the Pineal Zen Equation'. It was a big day for me: I'd been writing for years and getting nowhere, and affirmation like an acceptance from a magazine of the stature of *Interzone* was exactly what I needed to keep me writing. *Interzone* had been going for a few years then, and it's still going strong now – a testament to the hard work of its editors. It's hard to overestimate the importance of the magazine in fostering new talent: most writers who go on to write novels cut their literary teeth on the short form, and these days there are precious few outlets for the short story. Let's hope *Interzone* can keep on for another two decades, and more.

# CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF INTERZONE





### GWYNETH JONES

Ah, *Interzone*! My formative memories are of the magazine in the mid-80s, when defining what is meant by 'hard radical sf' seemed vitally important. Does hard mean difficult? Does radical mean roots or cutting edge? Does it have to have rocketships? SF writers in those new romantic days had the audacity to care about current affairs, *any* kind of current affairs, not just the news pages in *New Scientist*, and *Interzone* ran extraordinary stories of immodest ambition like Michael Blumlein's 'Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case For Report', (#12 1984), an amazingly vicious assault about vivisectioning Ronald Reagan, in gruesome medical detail; Geoff Ryman's 'The Unconquered Country' (#7); Lee Montgomerie's 'War And/Or Peace' (#11), a phantasmagoria sort of based on the Greenham Common Protest. And I wish I could remember the title or the author of the hilarious one about Deconstructionist CIA agents in the White House...they may have been FBI... Maybe someone can help me?

My first ever published science fiction story, 'Gravegoods', was published by *Interzone* in 1989, in the 'Special Space Story' issue. I lost sight of the IZ a bit after that, though two Aleutian stories were published in the '90s, and a Polish ghost story called 'Grazing The Long Acre'; which makes quite a chunk of my whole output. But my real brush with *Interzone* fame came relatively recently with a novel extract, 'The Saltbox' (2001), which David Pringle was running for me in return for secret services to the magazine. A complaint from an outraged reader lead to copies of the issue being confiscated by the Brighton police, suspected of being paedophile porn. First I heard of it was a page on my message service (I was on holiday in California) saying, *call David Pringle urgently!* I was pretty excited, you may well imagine, but alas, nothing came of it. I never got my day in court.

### JAMIE BARRAS

One cold winter's evening about ten years ago, the wiring in the building in which I was living at the time burnt out, setting fire to a storeroom full of paint in the process. As my flat was on the fifth floor, and the storeroom was at the bottom of the building's only staircase, all that I could do was light a few candles, open a bottle of wine and wait to see who or what would reach me first: the fire brigade or the fire. While I was waiting, I read Mary A. Turzillo's 'Eat or Be Eaten: A Love Story' (*Interzone* 104), and I was...transported, drawn into the story, away from what was going on out in the real world. There can't be many magazines that can truthfully claim to publish fiction so good that its readers cease to notice that buildings are burning down around them. Happy 25th Anniversary, *Interzone*. May there be many more.

### PETER F. HAMILTON

Longest (and award winning!) story I sold to *Interzone* was 'The Suspect Genome', which came in at around 24,000 words. Horribly dated now as anyone who watches CSI will tell you. However, David Pringle was pleased with it, even thought it was far longer than he normally published. So given my unjust reputation for slightly bigger-than-average books, he gleefully told me: now you'll find out what proper editing is like. When the manuscript came back, he'd managed to cut it by 300 words. I was intolerably smug for a week.

### IAN R. MACLEOD

For me, *Interzone* will always mean David Pringle. After many years of working on 'the novel' and then 'the next novel', the latter of which I never finished, and neither of which sold, I found myself writing short fiction in the late 1980s. I wasn't a regular buyer of SF magazines, and had never attended an SF convention, but, as a frequenter of Roy Peyton's Andromeda Bookstore in Birmingham, I was a reader of *Interzone* – sometimes quietly in the shop during my long Civil Service lunch hours, although I did occasionally fork out my money. Now that I had some short stuff of my own to try out, it seemed the obvious place to try. I remember getting the sort of 'nice' rejection slips which are so encouraging when you're starting out writing, and become so annoying later on. Some of these were from this guy called Pringle. At the time, as I recall, *Interzone* was still a sort of collective. But Pringle seemed to be the main man, and I was flattered. All the more so when he bought what turned out to be my first published short story, and then quite a few after that. Eventually, I got to know David and his famous briefcase, in which he always had some new story, and to appreciate his quiet presence and patient faith and hope in what he was doing. I owe him a debt which I'm proud and happy to record here.

### STEPHEN BAXTER

*Interzone* gave me my first break, in buying my first professionally published story ('The Xeelee Flower' in 1987) and it stayed around to buy another, and another, with a few rejections along the way. It was exactly the platform that I and the rest of the '*Interzone* generation' needed to get started, and to get noticed. I always liked the fact that *Interzone* was an initiative that came out of fandom; it's one clear instance of fandom hugely enriching the professional field.

**More to come! If you would like to contribute to this feature please post your entry to the editorial address or email it to [25@ttapress.demon.co.uk](mailto:25@ttapress.demon.co.uk)**





## LANGFORD AND A LOYAL READER, PORTMEIRION

**Clarke Award.** The trophy bookend and £2007 cheque went to M. John Harrison for *Nova Swing*.

### AS OTHERS SEE US

Ruth Franklin reviews Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*: 'Michael Chabon has spent considerable energy trying to drag the decaying corpse of genre fiction out of the shallow grave where writers of serious literature abandoned it.' (*Slate*, May)  
 Christopher Hitchens knows our darkest secret: 'The great drawback of sci-fi is the dearth of sex from which it compels itself to suffer (I realized when reading Leader's book that this is why I have never bothered with the genre)...' (reviewing Zachary Leader's *The Life of Kingsley Amis* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, May)

**Germaine Greer** refutes John Lauritsen's theory of *Frankenstein* – that a great novel couldn't possibly have been written by self-educated Mary Shelley, so Percy Bysshe must be the real author – by ingeniously arguing that it's such a lousy book that Mary obviously *did* write it. (*Guardian*, April)  
 Such are the intricacies of feminist litcrit.

### NEBULA AWARDS

Oddly, all these '2006' winners appeared in 2005. **Novel:** Jack McDevitt, *Seeker*. **Novella:** James Patrick Kelly, *Burn*. **Novelette:** Peter S. Beagle, 'Two Hearts' (*F&SF* 10/05).

**Short:** Elizabeth Hand, 'Echo' (*ibid*). **Script:** *Howl's Moving Castle*. **Andre Norton (YA):** Justine Larbalestier, *Magic or Madness*.

**Ray Bradbury** amazed us all by explaining that 'Fahrenheit 451 is not...a story about government censorship.' (*LA Weekly*, May)

### AS OTHERS SEE US II

Why Antony 'Angel of the North' Gormley shouldn't be taken seriously: 'Well, look at the words I've been using, Vaporise, starburst, humanoid, space station, beaming down. And look at those figures waiting on rooftops – it's like an opening shot from *Doctor Who*. What is the language this sculpture speaks? Isn't it obvious? Sci-fi. [...] Serious artists need not feel threatened by it, any more than serious film-makers need feel threatened by an android blockbuster.' (Tom Lubbock, *Independent*, May)

**Trivia Masterclass.** On the 30th anniversary *Star Wars* celebration in LA: 'Those in touch with their dark sides rushed exhibits of tortured druids on a rack, Luke Skywalker's severed head and the Princess Leia slave costume...' (*Time*, May) A correspondent explains: 'These are not the druids you're looking for.'

### MORE AWARDS

**Compton Crook/Stephen Tall** for first novel: Naomi Novik, *His Majesty's Dragon* •

**Edgars (mystery):** Matthew Graham's script for the first instalment of *Life on Mars* won Best TV Episode Teleplay • **Philip K. Dick:** Chris Moriarty, *Spin Control* • **Pilgrim** for sf criticism: Algis Budrys • **Pulitzer** for fiction: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*.

**Tolkien Rotates in Grave, Again.** Junk mail from Hawthorne Village offers the Official Lord of the Rings Express Diesel Locomotive. *This heirloom quality train – richly adorned with scenes and characters from the movie trilogy including Elven text and a working headlight on the diesel locomotive – will have you reliving this epic saga every time the train journeys around the tracks.* One of Gandalf's fireworks notoriously whizzed past 'like an express train', but...

**Magazine Scene.** Two new UK rivals to *SFX* are *SciFiNow* and *Death Ray*. In America, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* (dead since 1955) is being relaunched.

### AS OTHERS SEE US III

From a droll list of alleged book-trade words: "Gatsby" (n.) the twice-weekly enquiry about the possibility of a new book by Anne McCaffrey/Raymond Feist/Robert Rankin from a sad bastard.' (*The Bookseller*, March)

### THOG'S MASTERCLASS

**The Nose of Heisenberg Dept.** 'Big boogers of uncertainty were beginning to form.' (Vernor Vinge, *Rainbows End*, 2006)

**Dept of Chemical Arcana.** 'He wasn't a chemist, but he had spent a couple of years studying organic chemistry. Changing just one number or a couple of letters, he knew, could mean two very different compounds.' (Ian Smith, *The Blackbird Papers*, 2004)

**Whack-a-Simile Dept.** 'Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle began to pop into place like rabbits into holes at the sound of dog.' (Peter Hawkins, 'The Edge of Oblivion', *New Worlds* 102, Jan 1961)

**Dept of Possibly Unfair Advantage.** 'Claudie Andre-Deshays...had beaten hundreds of men to become her country's first spacewoman.' (Brian Harvey, *Russia in Space: The Failed Frontier?*, 2001)

**Equine Anatomy Dept.** 'Terrence knew he would have to stop several times and pick out his mare's hooves, but at least it wouldn't be the thick, forelock-deep goop that could suck the shoes off a horse...' (Raymond Feist in *Legends II*, 2003)

## ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



## R.I.P.

**Lloyd Alexander** (1924–2007), US author best known for his 1964–68 Prydain sequence of YA Celtic fantasies beginning with *The Book of Three* and *The Black Cauldron* (title of the Disney adaptation), died on 17 May; he was 83.

**Massimo Belardinelli** (1938–2007), Italian cartoonist who was in the original *2000AD* team (*Ace Trucking*, *Dan Dare* revival, *Slaine*), died in March aged 68.

**Christopher 'Jamie' Bishop** (1971–2007), US academic who created digital cover art for four books by his sf author father Michael Bishop, was killed in the 16 April shootings at Virginia Tech (where he taught German). He was 35.

**Paul E. Erdman** (1932–2007), Canadian writer whose bestselling thrillers included near-future borderline sf like *The Last Days of America* (1981), died on 23 April at age 74.

**Bernard Gordon** (1918–2007), US screenwriter who scripted the 1962 *The Day of the Triffids*, died on 11 May aged 88.

**Dave Martin** (?1934–2007), co-author with Bob Baker of eight 1970s *Dr Who* scripts – one introducing the dread K9 – died earlier this year; he was 72.

**Pat O'Shea** (1931–2007, born Pat Shiels), author of *The Hounds of the Morrigan* (1985 – a fine, funny children's fantasy saturated with Irish myth – and a few lesser works, died on 3 May. She was 76.

**Kurt Vonnegut** (1922–2007), who should need no introduction, died on 11 April at age 84. Though often deceptively lightweight and laconic, his best sf was hard to forget: *Player Piano* (1951), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)... Somehow, despite verbally distancing himself from 'the file drawer labeled "Science Fiction" [...] since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal', Vonnegut kept returning to the genre and his invented sf author Kilgore Trout, right up to his final satirical novel *Timequake* (1997).

**Dick Vosburgh** (1929–2007), comedy writer/broadcaster who voiced Captain Larry Dart in the *Space Patrol* puppet series (ABC/Rediffusion 1963–4), died on 18 April; he was 77.

**Leslie Waller** (1923–2007), US author who novelized *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, died on 29 March aged 83.

**Dave Wood** (1936–2007), popular UK fan active in the 1950s/60s and again since 1983, died on 5 June; he was 70. His fanzine *Xyster* won a 1984 Nova Award. He was a friend.

# THE MARCH OF THE WHITESHIRTS

IN 1964, WHEN CYRIL Connolly published his influential book *The Modern Movement*, he was already quoting the likes of Spender as suggesting that modernism was already dead. That same year, when I took over *New Worlds*, Ballard and I were promoting William Burroughs (from whom the term 'interzone' was taken) as an example of 'a new literature for the space age'. We argued that modernism had become a spent force and that it was as much a convention-bound genre as any other, including the SF genre. What we were hoping to see was a new kind of fiction which engaged with the present in its own terms, that effectively modernism (as exemplified today, for instance, in the work of Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis and others) was not a form capable of describing and exploring a new sensibility which had come with the dropping of the Atom Bomb on Hiroshima and the sending of men into space.

From everything that I have seen in the past forty years or so, I've no reason to believe that much has changed. Admittedly, modernist fiction limps along on automatic, as predictable and as nostalgic as the detective fiction of, say, Ian Rankin, and there remains an audience for it. That audience has always existed, since the days when Bentley ruled the library shelves (before the advent of the 'six shilling novel' and the first great flourishes of English modernism with the likes of James, Hardy, Conrad, Wells and Gissing and thin shades of Austen, Dickens or Ainsworth still dominated the best-seller lists of the time. The majority of science fiction and fantasy writers continue to turn out versions of the same stories which appeared in *Astounding* or *Unknown Worlds*, in the days when Campbell edited them and large numbers of people continue to reward them for offering no more than minor variations on the mixture as before, whether they are concerned with the vastness of intergalactic space or the odd doings of the denizens of fairyland. The majority of authors who confront the present, rather than exemplify

it, are not hugely rewarded for their pains and those who reflect the fundamental conservatism of the reading public are usually far better rewarded. Yet the likes of Ballard, whose career somewhat resembles that of his predecessor Conrad, continue to work and continue to find an audience. Many such authors have fewer places to publish and usually those places, as they were in Conrad's day, are magazines, traditionally where readers impatient with the *status quo* go to look for their fiction.

We are living in times of Whiteshirt fascism, when our liberties and altruism are under sustained attack from forces which take forms the likes of Pohl and Kornbluth, Bester, Sheckley and, yes, Phil Dick predicted they would take in stories like *The Space Merchants*, *Tiger! Tiger!*, *Mindswap* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Forces impressively described by William Burroughs, who took his inspiration chiefly from that generation of SF writers and added his own particular genius for prose and structure making him so influential on my generation, finding precise metaphors in the language and practises of the drug culture. As a consequence, we require a fiction which is even more able to confront those forces, see them for what they are and find a language powerful enough to resist them. I have never been in any doubt, especially since Margaret Thatcher and her people changed the meaning of the language of liberal-humanism, that rhetoric is perhaps the most powerful tool of all in defeating totalitarianism in whatever guise it presents itself (either as Marxism or Monetarism). Without a precise dialectic, a language which exactly sums up the world we live in, we have no means of defeating what threatens us. Without it, we can have no effective politics and will continue (as most of us do today) to use the imprecise terms of an earlier generation, which somehow fail to describe our dilemma.

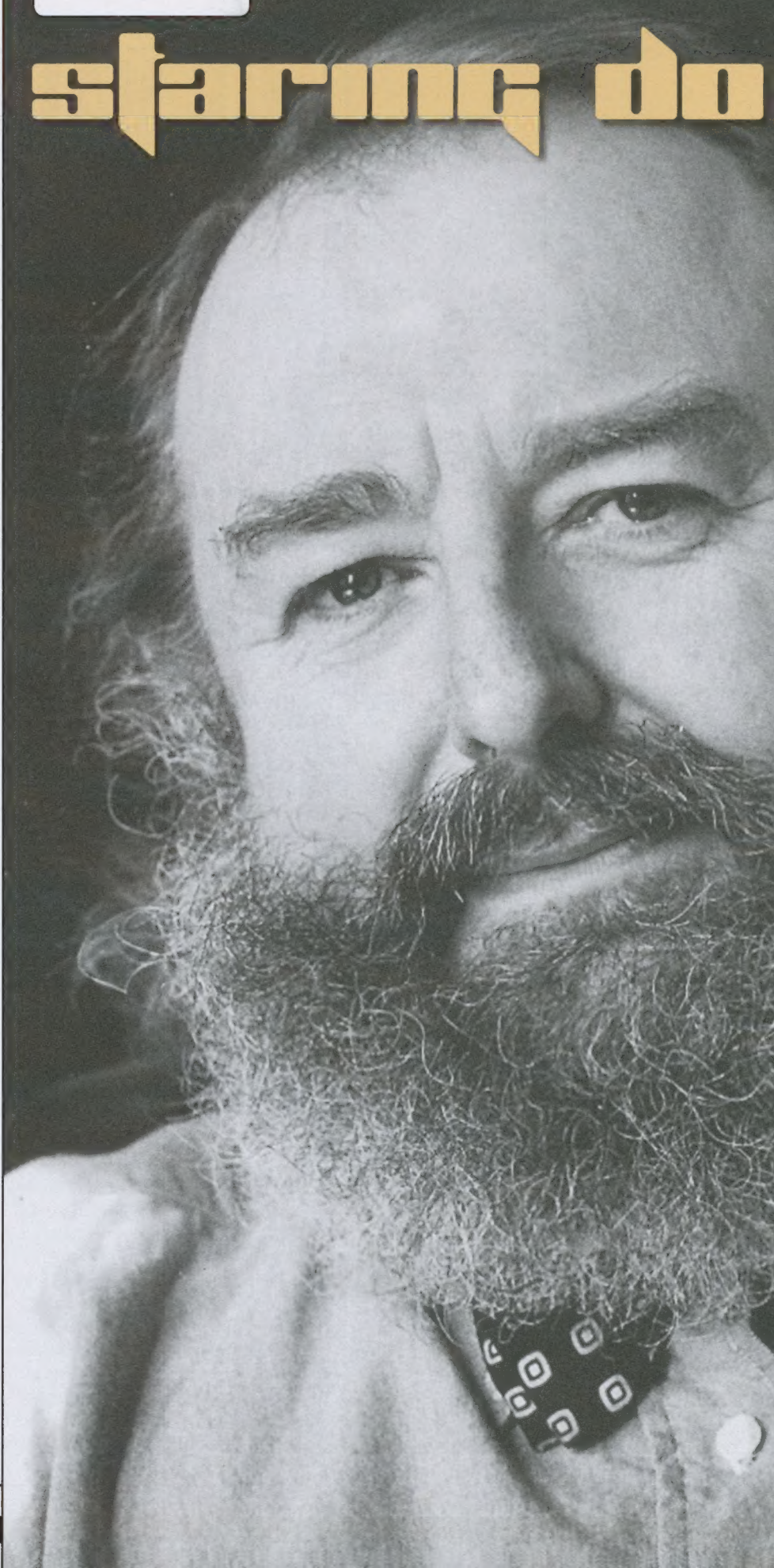
Of course, language is not important only where it relates to our politics, but there is a perhaps more general debate



which goes on all the time and which is exemplified by the fiction we read and write and how we receive that fiction. Burroughs, who invented so many terms besides 'interzone', understood this perhaps better than anyone else of his generation. It was why the likes of Ballard and myself celebrated him as soon as we began reading those little green and black Olympia Press books which began to appear from Girodious in the 1950s and for which I was arrested by the Special Branch when I began smuggling them into the UK; why I, and others, defended him so passionately during the famous 'Ugh' debate of the early 1960s when the likes of Victor Gollancz and Edith Sitwell, who had so much invested in the modernism of their time, attacked him in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is why we have to continue supporting Burroughs and those he inspired in these reactionary times, where almost every book on 'front tables' in Waterstone's and Barnes and Noble absolutely stinks of the worst kind of nostalgia, with writers perpetually recycling the ideas of their fathers and grandfathers, even to the extent of turning out sequel upon sequel of Jane Austen novels or reviving Edgar Allen Poe characters and offering this offal, so long past its sell-by date, as 'post-modernism'.

What Burroughs offered us, when he was finally published in the UK and US around 1964, wasn't post-modernism but a kind of anti-modernism, a way of condensing narrative. And he offered us one form of language we could use to attack the kind of conservatism already taking shape at a time when most of us were basking in the last summers of the Golden Age, the final decade before our economic circumstances, which offered us so much hope and optimism, such a willingness to take risks (and risk is at the very core of real art), were to change and become formalised in what we now term 'Thatcherism' or 'Reaganism'. We now have a deeper understanding of where those terrible notions were to lead us, with the peace, prosperity and very existence of the planet threatened more than at any other time in our history. It is only in *Interzone*, where our visions are given flesh, that we can ever hope to find the means of resisting and perhaps even defeating Doctor Benway and his team-mates. We should make the most of our chance not only by keeping magazines like this alive but by filling them with fiction which will help us exemplify, confront and overcome the Whiteshirts wherever they set up their standards. ✧

# staring do





# win the witches

## Andrew Hedgecock talks to the writer who introduced him to entropy, Alfred Bester and armchair anarchism...

When I was 13 a patronising librarian took great pleasure in telling me I was too young to borrow Michael Moorcock's *The Final Programme*, so I got my dad to get it out on his ticket. Buoyed by the pleasure of putting one across the staff of Doncaster Public Library, I plunged into the first novel about the lives and times of Moorcock's protean, time-tripping antihero Jerry Cornelius. To be honest, I think I'd been drawn to it because I thought Cornelius might be a cross between James Bond and Tarot, hero of early 70s children's TV fantasy series, *Ace of Wands*. He wasn't, and I struggled to make sense of the language, themes and bizarre arc of the story.

But I was hooked. And for me *The Final Programme* fulfilled the same function as the severed ear in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* – it was a ticket into another world. Before long, I was delving into the dictionary for the meaning of 'entropy', 'obsidian' and 'hermaphrodite'; scouring the encyclopaedia for references to Le Corbusier, Hindu cosmology and unified field theory; and pestering my older sister with questions about LSD, Zoot Money and Courrèges.

Before long I was voraciously consuming any other Moorcock books I could lay my hands on, and catching up with the artists, writers and ideas that inspired him. Over the years – through his roles as reviewer, critic and editor of the iconoclastic *New Worlds* – Moorcock led me to a huge range of writers, including: Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, M. John Harrison, Fritz Leiber, Pamela Zoline, Thomas M. Disch, James Sallis, Joanna Russ, Alfred Bester, Philip Wylie, Maurice Richardson (author of the fiercely imaginative and witty *Exploits of Engelbrecht*), feminist polemicist Andrea Dworkin and anarchist activist Stuart Christie.

It wasn't The Sex Pistols who sparked the inchoate interest in anarchism that led me to read Malatesta and Kropotkin, it was Michael Moorcock. It would be ludicrous to claim Moorcock led me towards a design for living, but he's indirectly responsible for my capacity to resist the designs for living others try to impose on me.

And he's provided me with some of the most engaging, amusing and enjoyable reading experiences I've had over the past thirty-odd years: among the contenders for my desert island booklist from his output of around 100 books would be the *Between the Wars* (Colonel Pyat) series, his secret history of the twentieth century; *Mother London*, his mythic and elegiac re-imagining of city of his birth; *Behold the Man*, the story of a time traveller who takes the role of Christ; *The Brothel in Rosenstrasse*, a complex examination of morality and eroticism; *Gloriana*, an alternate history story riffing on *Gormenghast* and *The Faery Queen*; and *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, an underrated reworking of the Grail myth.

But my entry into Moorcock's world came through Jerry Cornelius. So when I got the chance to talk to the author – now based in Texas – about his work, Jerry was the obvious place to begin.

Since the 1960s Jerry and his troupe of adversaries and associates have provided Moorcock with a way of dealing with the social, political and technological upheavals of our era, beginning with the threats and possibilities of the 1960s and the diminished dreams of the 1970s.

But, for me, Jerry's finest hour came in 1984, a couple of years after the first edition of *Interzone*, with *The Alchemist's Question*, a story that seemed to capture better than any other the creeping authoritarianism of Britain in the mid-1980s. At that point, Moorcock seemed to be 'retiring' Jerry for the foreseeable future, but went on to resurrect him in the late 1990s, to highlight the insanity and hypocrisy of the era of NuLabour and Neo-conservatism. So what makes





With Jon Finch on the set of *The Final Programme* / With Ian McLagan at a Food Pantry Gala / With Linda, 2006

Jerry Cornelius such a versatile and durable vehicle for making sense of the times in which we live?

"He is a technique – as M. John Harrison first observed – before he is a character. It's what makes him so malleable, so able to observe and act as both an exemplar and a critic of his times. He is a character, of course, which is why he works, in a way the characters of Molière or the *Commedia dell'Arte* do not work for us, these days. He is not the representation of a virtue or a vice, but of qualities which might be virtuous or vicious, depending upon the context. And so I place him in the context (the Middle East, for instance, or Bush's America) and see how he will act and think.

"I use quotations for narrative purpose and to form an ironic counterpoint. These are probably what are misunderstood most about the JC stories. People failed to realise that use of real people and places, too, are there for narrative. As they are used, for instance, in Ballard's 'condensed novels'. People say there is no 'story' because the story is contained within all the elements but not constructed in a way which, I believed, made the medium the message. This was the problem originally and it breaks from modernism's constructions, which became conventions by the time I was writing in the early '60s. Jerry is the narrative and we take the conventional diagnoses for granted in the stories. These

are sometimes referred to obliquely by characters or through quotation."

Moorcock is currently working on a new JC story, provisionally titled *Modem Times*, which continues themes found in the original Cornelius books, but deals even more with 'virtuality'.

"It will deal with the tendency to construct fantasies which we then attempt to make reality – the kind of abstraction which allows people to refer to dead people as 'collateral damage'. I think monetarism, consumerism are fantasy constructs. Like fascism in the '20s and '30s they seem to work and to be real, but are an attempt to impose simplicity on a complex world. That is why such systems always fail, because ultimately the reality refuses to obey the created rules. In fact the more the rules are imposed, the less well reality responds. Social dysfunction is the result. I believe, at present, that the US and UK lead the world in this dysfunction. However, I'm curious about what degree of reality can be created, if at all. Jerry has always lived in a world where he has to find his own narrative, his own reality, to counter the simplistic narratives of those in power."

#### An element of anger

Moorcock's oblique approach to his themes has led to many of his stories accreting new layers of meaning in the years since they were written. I've recently returned to

his *Dancers at the End of Time* trilogy, first published between 1972 and 1976, and my response to the stories has changed entirely.

In the '70s, the childlike amorality of characters that party, and carelessly consume natural resources, as their universe dies had a sort of insane charm. It's still funny but, as the planet rushes towards ecological calamity, the humour is now tinged with a much darker resonance.

"Clearly, those stories *have* taken on a life of their own because people say they have. People see them in different lights. When this happens, I feel I've succeeded. It's not as if we didn't know we were already abusing resources and creating some kind of disaster when I wrote them. I understand two ways to offer an exaggerated or condensed narrative: one is through fantasy (if you like) and the other is through comedy. Both condense events to achieve their effects. A fantastical comedy seems to do the job especially well. I was interested to hear Martin Amis telling a radio interviewer that fantasy only worked if it was short – a few pages. That particular interviewer said nothing, but I happened to know *Dancers* were his favourite books.

"Comedy, I think, whether Cornelius or *Dancers*, allows one to exaggerate whilst best calling on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. I also think good comedy must contain an element of anger, or at least strong concern about the world's





**"I use quotations for narrative purpose and to form an ironic counterpoint"**

**Turning 50 in the Roof Garden / With Linda at the cottage in High Cogges / In Morocco / With Alan Moore, 2006**

follies. For me anger often translates itself into comedy, as with the scene I've mentioned in the past, where I burst into tears at Felix Green's pictures of burning children in Vietnam and within minutes was writing a comic scene transferring Vietnam to Ladbrooke Grove. Presumably the comedy remains effective if one's anger is well-directed..."

#### **A sense of shamanism**

Another Moorcock series that has grown in stature and significance over last 25 years is his alternate history of the 20th century, *Between the Wars*, also known as the 'Colonel Pyat tetralogy'. The first Pyat books were published in the last decade of the Cold War; the third in a period of political uncertainty after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe; and the final book with the world caught between the Scylla of resurgent religious fundamentalism and the Charybdis of the Project for the New American Century. So to what extent were Pyat's memories of the nightmare years of the mid-20th century infected by events going on outside the books?

"It was exhausting to write all the volumes in the Pyat sequence but especially exhausting to do the final book, *The Vengeance of Rome*, partly because the language of fascism (not necessarily Nazism) was coming back as I wrote. When I conceived the sequence in the

mid-70s we could reasonably believe that was behind us, apart from minority groups, at least in the West. I know of course that it still existed in Russia and the Soviet sphere. Indeed, it was experience of that which sparked the idea for the book. I wasn't to know quite how relevant to the present the books would increasingly become.

"Just as in science fiction, where you sometimes conjure up a vision which increasingly represents the present, there is a sense of shamanism involved when politics and public rhetoric reflect what one's writing about. As events came to repeat the 1930s (as did the rhetoric) it did become much harder. One wished that Pyat had lived another twenty or twenty-five years so he could deal with the events and make comparisons. But I was also pretty sure that readers would be able to make those associations. As I've said elsewhere, I don't have dumb readers!

"All this went through my mind, of course, when pulling the threads together. And many critics saw the comparisons. The stupidest review, typically, was by D.J. Taylor who, if he read the book at all, missed much of the humour and ironic associations. But I write books for people who read with some attention, as I do, so I knew I could trust them to see the connections, even though Pyat, who died in 1977, wasn't able to applaud the rise of Thatcher, Reagan, Blair or Bush. He died,

in fact, before the world changed, before Atlanticist Tories supported Blair, before Southern Democrats became Reaganites, before the reality shows and lifestyle TV."

I ask Moorcock to what extent – if any – his response to social, political and cultural influences has altered in recent years. Has he mellowed?

"My reaction to world events has always determined what I write. I've done it better in some books than others. I just read *Cheering for the Rockets*, which is my angry old man response of ten years ago to Clinton's gunboat diplomacy, but by the time 9/11 came I think I was already writing a bit more subtly about events in *Firing the Cathedral*. However, my anger was probably less checked by humour in that, *King of the City* and a few other things than it was in the '70s and '80s.

"All that said, I did feel the strain of events seeming to catch up with the story in *The Vengeance of Rome*. The main problem, however, was finding the right resolution and I'm pleased that, in most peoples' opinion, I seem to do it. I remember having similar problems with the last Cornelius novel, *The Condition of Muzak*. I was interested in what John Clute said in comparison of the two sequences. I suspect he was bang on. There are slightly similar resonances, of course. Both come to ground in encounters with the central character's mother."





### Memory and need

In Alan Wall's new book on writing fiction (*Need to Know? Writing Fiction*) he talks about the Pyat books in terms of the way they tackle the relationship of memory to need, and the link between need and prejudice. But to what extent does Wall's take on the Pyat books ring true for Moorcock?

"Memory and need. Good point. I'm looking forward to reading Wall's book. He's one of the best novelists I know and very intelligent. One of the few who has made it his business to educate himself in theoretical physics to a pretty high level.

"Pyat, of course, is providing himself with desperate rationalisations at every turn and is using anticipation of a utopian future. His false memories do contribute to his need for a safe and simple future – what formulaic political systems are always promising to supply."

So has the theme of memory and need informed the writing of other books – for example, those found in Waterstone's SF section as well as those on the 'literary fiction' shelves?

"Memory and need. I grew up in a very malleable landscape, constantly subjected to bombing. Thus it became rather 18th century in its permanence, where the great architecture of Wren and Hawksmoor dominated the surrounding area for a while until 1950s brutalism began to put all that concrete back into the city and make London a lot less plastic in fact. Maybe that's the architecture of uncertain times. It certainly became more flexible by the '70s and '80s, though I'm noticing a return to brutalism in London again, which might have something to do with an underlying anxiety about the future.

"Myth and need, of course, is a pretty regular theme in my stuff, really since I began writing. The Elric stories even touch on it, especially in peripheral stories like *To Rescue Tanelorn* and *Earl Aubec*. By 1965, with *The Final Programme* and *Behold the Man*, I was well seated on that particular horse and have hardly got off since.

"*Mother London* states it pretty clearly, as have other books. We reinvent the past in order to reinvent the future, if you like. Certainly to reinvent the present. It's a process which has been well in evidence in England at least from Edward III's time. *Morte D'Arthur* is a reinvented history to suit the needs of the day, written at Caxton's own request. Probably the first ever commissioned 'best seller'. *The Faerie Queene* was more high-minded, I suppose. And then there's Shakespeare's history plays.



"One of the reasons I wanted to move to Texas was because the process was still very much in evidence. Scarcely 100 years from the great Western myths (which Larry McMurtry has done so much more with, in my view, than Cormac McCarthy) to the present. Conscious invention of 'memory' which serves the ambitions of a culture is by no means new. And it's proven especially useful for those embarking on genocide as America did during its expansion into native lands and as Arabia would like to do (as she is doing with George W. Bush's compliance in uniting previously disparate factions) as far as Israel is concerned."

### Wandering off the narrow road

The fact that themes such as this cut across the whole of Moorcock's work highlights one of its key attractions – and the cause of skull-splitting migraines for literary critics. Anyone dipping into the body of stories he has told over the past 50 years – he was first published in his teens – gradually realises they are reading a massive, complex and interlinked series of story cycles that cut across fictional universes, styles, forms and thematic concerns. At some point in the 1960s his narratives began to intertwine – tendrils from one story cycle meandering across genre boundaries into another. So how did it happen?

"Probably through not knowing any better. I enjoyed such a wide range of writing from an early age – from Edgar Rice Burroughs to George Bernard Shaw to H.G. Wells. I was seventeen or so before I realised I didn't have to have three names to be a writer and used to put my middle initial in there to give it the right cadence. Given the range of techniques presented by this wide reading, it meant I could come up with a technique that was partly my own – at least when I started regularly writing for adults. I'm a typical autodidact, which means I've read widely, have enthusiasms outside the norm (Meredith, for instance) and feel frustrated with received opinion and conventional academic criticism. As a result I have an impulse towards, if you like, ontology. That is, I try to bring all my enthusiasms together.

"Thus, when I was editing *New Worlds* I sought to unify this broad range of interests. I wanted it to be about art, science and writing, including poetry, and that was the chief reason for making it a 'glossy': so we could reproduce contemporary artists like Paolozzi and Hamilton, so we could run photographs and so on."

But what were the demands of a

story that led him to opt for a particular approach, technique or genre?

"When I had a particular idea that was best suited, say, to fantasy or SF, I'd write it as fantasy or SF. If comedy was a better way of handling it, then I'd use comedy. Intervention in Edwardian ideas of imperialism, especially from the 'left' – benign colonialism – gave me *Warlord of the Air*. I read vast amounts of 'minor' Edwardian stuff at one point and I liked airships. Around 1970 I decided to concentrate on 100 years from 1870, since for me that was when modern times began – when the arguments began to anticipate post-war arguments – on race, politics, religion and so on. Also I'm just curious about everything. I like travelling. I like to flâneur around new cities. I like to sit and watch the world. I think William Burroughs was a big inspiration. Not a strong influence, any more than he was on Ballard, say, but an inspiration: he made you realise it was possible to get on top of contemporary life, that you didn't need to stick to the narrow road of modernism.

"I had a lot of stories to tell. I learned how an icon – a single image, if you like – could become an entire narrative, so you didn't need to write that story, just refer to it, and get on with a more personal or different kind of story. If I cared about the reviewers, I'd write stuff reviewers were more comfortable with. I remember Jimmy Ballard and I sitting in Finch's one Saturday and both of us agreeing we could write narrow stuff but that there was no point in it. And then there's the other aspect – just having fun. Writing a comic. Writing a sword and sorcery story. If it didn't take up too much time I'd love to write another sword and planet story in the old *Planet Stories* tradition. I did it a bit in an homage to Leigh Brackett a while ago. It's sort of like playing the blues for fun. All the better if you can get together with a couple of mates. It does you good to return to your roots.

"My Metatemporal Detective stories offer me the same pleasure. People refer to Sherlock Holmes, but they don't know about Sexton Blake, who is Begg's true inspirer, as Zenith the Albino was Elric's. Nice to have fun bringing them together. Keeping one's hand in while something a bit more ambitious bubbles on the back burner."

### The cracking of the dam

Over the years, Moorcock's genre blending has continued unabated. Most writers demonstrating virtuosity in popular forms and 'litfic' – to borrow an expression from

Colin Greenland – tend to distinguish their mainstream and genre work through the use of pseudonyms. There are very few at the other end, allowing their stories to leak into each other. The other notable example that springs to mind is William McIlvanney, whose 'litfic' characters flit into his crime stories. This seems to have had a negative impact on the critical appraisal of McIlvanney, so I ask Moorcock if he feels his work would have received a more positive response from reviewers and critics if he hadn't been so cavalier in relation to their expectations and the categories they impose.

"I don't know. It mostly depends on luck. Pynchon, for instance, wasn't doing anything quite as interesting as the *New Worlds* writers in the 1970s and yet he got a lot more attention – and continues to. Of course he has an acceptable 'literary' style and can, indeed, write very well. As can DeLillo and as can Michael Chabon, both of whom draw on a pretty wide range of influences and techniques. Oddly, I'm used to both responses. My first books, like *Behold the Man* and *The Final Programme* were not reviewed as genre books. It wasn't until the sword and sorcery books started going into hardback that critics became confused. I remember an early review by Peter Ackroyd. He'd been sent a Corum book and was baffled by the reception I'd been given by the likes of Angus Wilson. Only with *Gloriana*, I think, did Ackroyd start to take me seriously. I don't, of course, get anything like the same review space in the US that I get in the UK, where people are, perhaps, more used to me reviewing general books and doing all kinds of journalism. Also Americans are actually more prone to pigeon-holing than the British. Even when publishers do their utmost to ensure that my work doesn't get in the SF section of Waterstone's, the bookshops categorise it as SF (check out Amazon)."

Is Moorcock suggesting things are better than they used to be? Is fiction becoming less categorised?

"I don't mind this, really, because it gets people who like my non-generic work into the SF and fantasy section where they might come across some superior work by other writers. If someone looking for *Vengeance of Rome* has to look in the SF section the chances are they'll take a look at an M. John Harrison or a Jeffrey Ford – there are so many good writers these days – so it's all shifting in the right direction. People such as Harrison, Disch and Ballard, who have always been 'cross-over' writers, have all improved the



situation. Of course, there are still Litfic writers like Atwood who try to distance themselves from genre, perhaps because they genuinely believe they're inventing the tropes themselves. P.D. James's *Children of Men* creaked with generic conventions of the most boring kind, whereas Aldiss's *Greybeard*, written on the same theme some forty years ago and avoiding all the conventions isn't even in the shops.

"I do my best in reviews to raise these points and occasionally you see something has filtered through. We keep on keeping on. There are a few better educated literary editors out there these days, not all of them cautious about their broader enthusiasms. There have always been writers who have done well as literary writers, of course, but have championed the best genre work – Angus Wilson didn't just champion *New Worlds* and me at the Arts Council. He recommended that Sidgwick and Jackson publish Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!* which is the book which got me interested in SF. Doris Lessing. Angela Carter. It wasn't only Amis and Conquest who promoted SF in the '50s but Amis was a calculating self-publicist in a way the others simply weren't and so promoted one kind of SF. The habits which created *The Movement* extended to SF and jazz which ultimately proved so disappointing to the poor old buffers. I remember a conversation with Edmund Crispin in which he said he preferred SF to remain a little pool of its own, not become part of the mainstream. They found it hard to keep that dam from cracking, eh? It's pleasant to know that overall we had time on our side!"

### Peake experiences

In addition to *Modem Times*, Moorcock has been working on *The Sedentary Jew*, a reworking of the myth of the Wandering Jew in which the protagonist is doomed to remain in London for eternity (see page 16). In addition, he is writing a memoir of Maeve and Mervyn Peake (see page 13).

"The Peake memoir has proven very difficult to write, not only because I haven't always trusted my own memory but also because when I have succeeded in bringing the relevant memories back other baggage has come with them, making me confront myself in unexpected ways. Clearly, I've buried pain with memory. The story of the Peakes is a tragic one. Although I've now written at least half of it, it has been a struggle and remains a struggle. I doubt if it will read like a struggle. I hope not. But it's exhausting. Peake's deterioration into a form of Parkinsonism and the effect it

had on his wife and family – and to a lesser extent his friends – wasn't easy to bear at the time and, of course, becomes almost as hard to bear when not only Maeve and Mervyn but other dear friends have died prematurely. I depend on the notion of a complex multiverse which has order and meaning, and in which justice can be created if it didn't previously exist. The reality of Peake's tragedy threatens that notion.

"There's another reason I've had trouble working on my Peake memoir: I used to have a horror of simply remembering things wrong. My editor at Cape, Dan Franklin, told me not to worry. Even if someone disagrees, it's still your version of a story. I was a bit uncertain because I know Jimmy Ballard was a bit upset with some of my memories in Iain Sinclair's BFI book on *Crash*, and I wouldn't have hurt his feelings for worlds. So I became a bit inhibited. Still, maybe it's best to tell stories about only dead friends, I don't know. Or about my childhood. I've actually been enjoying reading Pete Weston's history of SF fandom and contributing to it, seeing pictures which bring back memories of when I was an impossibly fresh-faced child editor. It's a wonder anyone took me seriously!"

### The kindness of strangers

Nine years ago I interviewed Moorcock for *The Third Alternative*, and he was notably upbeat in relation to prospects for liberty and the sane, humane application of technology. But has the increasing authoritarianism of UK and US governments in the wake of September 11 2001, and the alarming realignment of church and state (in both developed and developing nations) done anything to erode this optimism?

"Well, I'm still hopeful that we can start getting our democratic rights restored. There's a group here whose meetings I attend called the Bill of Rights Defence Committee and it's a very wide variety of political opinion from right libertarians to left anarchists – liberals, radicals, gun-controllers, anti-gun-controllers – and we are all concerned about the erosion of civil liberties. I suspect that if we get Democrats back in to power next time, they will be under pressure to repeal much of the 'emergency' legislation which has been subject to such abuse. Blair, it seems to me, had already responded to pressure. If the attack on civil rights in the name of 'anti-terrorism' continues, then I'd have reason to become gloomier of course. At the moment I'm cautiously optimistic we can reverse the

trend. Ultimately, I'd hope people realise that by curtailing civil liberties politicians are acknowledging that Osama and Co have already won the war. The situation in Iraq can only be improved by the US/UK leaving and the UN moving in."

Moorcock – a writer seemingly captivated by the energies and myths of London, the city in which he was born 67 years ago – has lived in a small town in Texas for more than a decade. I asked to what extent life in the Lone Star State has influenced his outlook and his work.

"It's been a profound education and I have good friends in Texas, but I'm a cosmopolitan by disposition and this is, it has to be said, a provincial place to be. And from a simple, literary point of view, there are more stories – a great variety of stories – where there is a greater concentration of people. If I sat on a bench in small-town Texas I'd be lucky if I saw two people go by, and I'd know pretty much their whole history. If I sit on a bench in Paris, a hundred or more people will go by, I'd know none of them and I could imagine what their stories might be. What's more I'd be somewhere where the unexpected was more likely to occur, so my own story would also change.

"I don't like being too safe, too comfortable, too predictable or to have too much of a routine. Still, I'm doing my best with what I have. And I still think of good stories in response to contemporary events and I still keep my optimism, which has always been rooted in the pleasure I take in the kindness of strangers.

"Being wheelchair bound in Paris as I was a couple of years ago certainly supported that faith in human nature – there's nothing like being in a weak position or needing the help of others in order to discover how decent most people are. Especially when someone hasn't frightened them. That's what I despise most about the likes of Bush and Blair, who use the fear of fear itself to manipulate us. I think Franklin D. Roosevelt's slogan remains the best political phrase I know, and it has inspired me pretty much since I started writing. One of my earliest books, my second SF novel, *The Winds of Limbo* (aka *The Fireclown*) quotes FDR's phrase about 'fear itself' at the beginning. But the answer to fear, of course, is not avoidance of what might threaten you but confrontation. As a kid I had terrible nightmares. I found that by staring down the witches I could banish them a lot faster than if I put my head under the pillow." ✧





"The fantastic has become respectable again. All those old hippies who liked art nouveau, surrealism and symbolism, for instance, are frequently in positions where they can pass their enthusiasms on. It's all fashion and snobbery and that's got a lot to do with economics, of course. Since *Lord of the Rings* became identified with big bucks, fantasy has become even more respectable. Even allegory is back in fashion. There is no book, however, which resembles *Gormenghast*, while there are many books which resemble *Lord of the Rings*."

"Peake, however, remains a confrontational artist and will never have the success that writers like Tolkien have. Peake is very much an English one-off – sui generis and thus able and likely to have influence over a very wide field. Writers and artists can be influenced by him but never really imitate him successfully."

# Lovers

A MEMOIR OF MERVYN & MAEVE PEAKE

## INTRODUCTION

Time Travelling: Mr and Mrs Peake Hold a Party, Autumn 1965

IT'S ONE OF MANY similar parties held at Drayton Gardens, South Kensington during the 1960s and 1970s. The large family house is fantastic. Almost a scene from *Performance*, only more exotic. Everything in it seems animated. There are murals, painted screens, stuffed birds. Even the artist's dummies are dressed for the occasion. Candles and soft lamps illuminate the house from basement to top floors. They cast lively shadows. There are bursts of laughter. Music everywhere. Light classical here, modern jazz there, a bit of Beatles, some R&B. On the stairs sits a melancholy John Braine, author of *Room at the Top*, squirming with distaste when advanced upon by a riotous Quentin Crisp in all his flouncing glory. Colin Spencer, cook and novelist, sits quietly weeping to himself in a bedroom. Intense art critics in Carnaby Street suits exchange enthusiasms over firmly gripped wine glasses. Pretty young actresses talk about lost, found or potential jobs while long-haired young writers pass a joint and marvel at the painted walls.

Over all this presides a bewildered king, his huge, handsome head lifted in frowning attention, a man whose massive black eyebrows have patches of grey, whose hair has become a helmet of white. It's a Celtic head. It could belong to Robert Graves's brother. Possibly a Roman emperor. Heavy lids. Sardonic, sensuous mouth. There's a half-understanding smile on his face which changes back to bewilderment as he stretches a powerful, palsied hand towards someone he thinks he recognises. He's dressed in velvet and there are heavy rings on his fingers. A blast of music drowns the remark someone has just made. He leans to listen, trying to phrase a reply. Monosyllables form with difficulty on his lips. His eyes brighten as young women try to make conversation with him. He could be a fallen angel. His accent is cultured, belonging to another age, almost Edwardian. From time to time his shaking arm lifts a cigar to his lips. "Oh, really?" he says, clearly not understanding what's said to him. His expression turning to one of mild panic, his eyes search for someone in the crowd, fixing at last upon a handsome woman with honey-coloured hair and hazel eyes who tilts a man's top hat over her face and sings along with the record. "No, no regrets..." She also holds a cigar in one hand, a wine glass in the other. She has a feather boa over her shoulders. Some of the young men surround her, laughing and congratulating her on her costume. Their colourful clothes give them the appearance of Shakespearian courtiers. She makes a joke or two. Then in turn her eyes look to find the white-haired man standing by the stairs. Her expression softens. She moves towards him.

"Feeling all right, darling?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," he murmurs. "Perfectly. Never felt better." He's relieved however when she links her arm through his and like a stately Guinevere leads him into one of the busy rooms. But he's no King Arthur. In appearance he's a magnificent, bewildered Lear. He's Mervyn Peake a few years before his final removal from this world of chaotic beauty into a world of clinical ugliness and perpetual pain.

This scene, for all its apparent melodrama, is the truth of it. Anyone who was there would tell you the same. The Peake parties were lush and rich but never self-conscious. The PreRaphaelite enthusiasms of the '60s, which brought Melvyn Bragg into a room dressed as if for the set of *Isadora*, which he was then writing, in black velvet, with silver rings, married well with the dark Fitrovian colours of Mervyn's canvasses, though Peake had no particular enthusiasm for the previous century. His preference was for the present, for Soho and the post-war world of eccentric Londoners whose portraits he collected in what he called his head-hunting sessions. At this stage of his life, however, because it reflected the concerns of his generation, his painting was somewhat out of fashion. England had entered one of her uncertain, self-examining periods of nostalgia, looking back to the fin-de-siecle and Edwardian social certainties.

Mervyn was dramatically handsome and his wife Maeve was dramatically beautiful. They had been a remarkable couple for years, famous for their good looks, though they had not mixed a great deal with the fashionable bohemians of their day. They had spent quite a lot of time away



from London, in Sark in particular. They had come to prefer each other's company. Although an accomplished painter, she had put aside her own work for the most part, concentrating on her children. He drew her and painted her a lot. She is there in everything he did. He wrote her poems when he was taken into the army during the Second World War, he produced fictional versions of her in his *Titus Groan*, which he wrote when he was in the army. On leave, he would draw her and the children. He was an inept soldier. He had a mild breakdown, which kept him away from overseas conflict. Eventually, he was commissioned as a war artist. His pictures of Maeve are not exaggerated any more than the poems for and about her, of which he wrote so many.

We know what she looked like from his work. He was an accurate portraitist. While certainly posed to bring out the subject's most dramatic features Bill Brandt's photographs of Mervyn did not lie either. Mervyn was as romantically handsome as any film star of the day.

Otherwise Mervyn and Maeve Peake were conventionally English in their formality while being unselfconscious romantics to the core. They did not posture. They did not cultivate the grotesque or the bizarre, though Mervyn might be attracted to eccentric-looking subjects. They were not burdened by publicity and addictions, as some of their contemporaries like Dylan Thomas were. They got on better with the self-effacing Graham Greene than the flamboyant Quentin Crisp.

Contrary to Crisp's melodramatic pronouncements towards the end of his life, Mervyn was not mad, nor Maeve neurotic. They were conscientious artists who put in a full day's work, pretty much with no time off, except for the usual holidays with the children. While erroneously assuming all their offspring would be artists of some kind too, they nonetheless cared for their children and did their best for them according to the conventions of their day, sending them to schools they thought would help them adapt better to the real world than they had themselves. They were often unable to contain their sense of life in conventional ways, but simple romantics was all they were, in an un-English world of reticence and rain.

I think it's fair to say, however, that they *were* somewhat unworldly. Certainly I thought they were and in my own awkward way I did my best to help them negotiate the harsh world I believed I understood better. I began my teenage career as a practical working journalist. I admired those who practiced art for art's sake, but I was used to working strictly to earn a living, getting commissions and being paid a decent fee for a decent piece. It took me a while to come to understand their mindset, though I always respected it because I was already convinced that Mervyn, who had been my hero for some time, was the first authentic genius I had ever met.

Their boys were almost exactly my age, with a year or so between them. Sebastian and I were about 16 when we first met. Fabian was a little younger. Clare was away at school most of the time. I would meet her occasionally on holidays, a leggy coltish pretty girl who had much of her mother's directness, engaging wholly with whatever she was doing. As she grew up I developed a strong brotherly affection for her while my early relationship with the boys was perhaps a little distant. I think they were all a bit bemused by my enthusiasm for their father's work, my sometimes inappropriate efforts to find him jobs when it seemed most of the people who had employed him had deserted him. When I offered him a commission doing thumbnail chapter headings for the Sexton Blake Library, of which I was a sub-editor, it was only because I knew I could get him some decent money and he had done similar sketches for *Radio Times*, which did not, to me, seem very different. He and Maeve had been very polite to me and I was never once embarrassed by them. When I looked back later, I could see that the idea of working for a commercial detective story magazine, even then well-known as 'the office boys' Sherlock Holmes' would have seemed a bit of a come down for a man who was still managing to illustrate the occasional book for the Folio Society.

They saw their children as independent creatures and admired them as much for their beauty as their brains. Mervyn loved to draw them, but they became reluctant to sit as they grew older. Their animals, too, were embraced, involved intimately with them, enjoyed with almost greedy relish for what they were. To me, the Peakes didn't seem to distinguish much between humans and the higher mammals. They had no habits of repression, just old-fashioned good manners. Generally they thought it proper to live and let live. As artists they sought to record the world and record their own passionate responses to it. The idea of controlling anyone or anything other than their work was alien to them. And as reason fell away from him with successive operations on Mervyn's poor, but deeply sane, brain, so did their means of shaping and understanding their world.

Little was known of Parkinson's Disease in those days. Alzheimer's had not been identified. Everything was seen as a sort of aberration, what they would usually call 'premature senility'. The only treatment was surgery. They wondered if he had picked up a virus during the 'flu epidemic which followed the First World War, if he had contracted something while in Belsen. Their method of coping with it was through operations to cut away the frontal lobes in the hope this would somehow help. Mervyn was a victim of the desperate medical ignorance of his day. Today, neither he nor any of us would have suffered as much. Maeve, though always her own woman, had come to take

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strength from Mervyn, whose reason was never diseased and who could be an inspiring teacher, as his *Craft of the Lead Pencil* testifies. Bit by bit the surgeon's scalpel sliced away his capacity to order his world, finishing any hope of helping him recover to shape again his great, natural genius into words and pictures.

I knew them both pretty well, I think. I was very young when we first met. I liked their children and shared their pain and confusion from Mervyn's first exhausted, bewildered intimations of his illness to the last years of institutions and terrible surgery. As an only child brought up by a divorced mother, I was doubtless attracted to them as the family I'd always desired and Maeve was in some ways the mother I would have created for myself if I'd had the chance. Mervyn was never a father figure, though he was an inspiration. Both of them were kind to me, even though I must have seemed very strange and amusing. They made me welcome. I saw a great deal of them. I got on well with Sebastian and Fabian and Clare with whom I shared many enthusiasms, since we were contemporaries. I think it is fair to say that I came to love them, perhaps because I was impressed by their own love for each other, a love which became unbalanced at the end but which never faltered, even when Mervyn pursued affairs or when Maeve wept with despair at his gradual withdrawal into his own besieged mind. I think I was a witness to a great love. I think I was privileged. I think I was marked by their relationship forever, by its intensity, its tragedy and the terrible injustice of it. Like them I had developed few guards against the world. I was direct and I was passionate. Because of my early successes I had never had to develop much in the way of self-protection. Like Maeve I was blunt in my judgements, fiery in my dislikes and direct in my habits. By the time I came to know Mervyn he was already in the early stages of his illness and I did not associate myself very closely with him, save that I shared the same kind of mind, the same way of looking at the world in symbolic, visionary terms, even if I lacked his power to create such splendidly, credible, Dickensian grotesques. For years I saw myself as a sort of craftsman and a middle-man whose job was to keep his work (and that of others) before the world, and I did this in a variety of ways, getting what was unpublished published or republished and regularly writing articles about him to remind the public who he was. Hilary Bailey, my ex-wife, helped Maeve produce her own touching memoir, *A World Away*. Our friend Oliver Caldecott, who was determined to bring Peake back into print in the best and most effective way, became his publisher. Maeve became a fairly regular illustrator for *New Worlds*. My friend Giles Gordon published *A World Away* and my acquaintance Anthony Burgess continued to be an enthusiastic publicist for Peake. Eventually, by the late '60s, I was instrumental, with Oliver Caldecott, in getting his great trilogy published in Penguin Modern Classics (introduced by Burgess) and was the catalyst who brought Langdon Jones and Maeve Peake together so that Jones, a close friend of mine who was primarily a composer and musician, could restore the final volume, *Titus Alone*, to something very close to what Peake had intended.

I am proud of what I helped to do and have always wanted to give credit to those who also helped and have, for one reason or another, not received the credit that was their due. We reprinted a number of Peake fragments in *New Worlds* which had not appeared anywhere else and through that magazine were able to introduce a great number of readers to his work. Another person who did the same, some years later, was the brilliant David Glass, whose theatre company produced an outstandingly good version of the first two *Titus* books and also introduced them to a new generation, a new kind of audience. I have been asked several times to write a biography of Peake, but had no desire to do so. Biographies and autobiographies never really manage to give the whole story and I had no desire to tell a partial story which might contradict someone else's memories, but probably do have something new to say. To make sure that not only my impressions are offered here I have asked Sebastian, Fabian and Clare Peake to give their opinions and reminiscences of the times I remember. I visited Mervyn at most of the institutions where he was sent during the periods when Maeve was no longer able to look after him and, with my wife Linda, I saw a fair amount of Maeve in her own final years. Linda remembers Maeve with particular affection for she was one of the few Englishwomen to welcome her and put her at her ease when she first arrived from America. While Maeve rarely disguised her dislike or suspicion of the wives and girlfriends I brought to see her, behaving in some ways like an aristocratic mother or aunt, equally she could be wonderfully gracious and generous if she liked them.

The idea of this memoir was first put to me by Sebastian Peake and it seemed that I might be able to do it, on the understanding that it would be subjective; a labour, in fact, of love. When Max Eilenberg of Methuen showed enthusiasm I decided it was time to do something. If readers find it sentimental, then it probably is. It is, as I've said, subjective. It is a book about the love of two people who could sometimes be 'difficult', though I never really saw that side of them. I can only describe the side I knew of my relationship with the Peakes and their love for each other. ✧

The memoir was commissioned by Denoel, France and will appear next year.





"I think it was good to be away from London for a while, both to taste the south western air and to see home from a distance. I doubt if I'll ever use up my London history, as it were. *Mother London, King of the City* and the short stories, including Jerry Cornelius of course, still haven't used a fraction of what I can draw on autobiographically, while my flying visits to London help me keep up with what's going on and the changes that are happening. My new Jerry Cornelius novel, *Modem Times*, is set in London, though it's mainly retrospective. I think I've got quite a few London stories in me – which I can intersperse with Paris stories, too!

"I've always liked the idea of the Wandering Jew since I first came across Eugène Sue's story (*Le Juif Errant*, 1844–45). And people of Jewish origin frequently identify with the ideas of the wanderer – and of the diaspora. I've always liked the idea, too, of a guy doomed to remain in sedentary comfort for eternity – maybe the other side of the Jewish character. So, wanting to do a book which was also a sort of mythological history of London, the combination seemed ideal."

# LONDON, MY LIFE!

## or THE SEDENTARY JEW

### CHAPTER ONE

#### I am Cursed

FOR MY SINS I have been married about two hundred times and to some very nice women. With others, it didn't turn out so good. But believe me eternal life hasn't been as hard as a lot of writers like to pretend. Generally, I'd say the first four or five centuries are the worst, because you keep expecting things to change and of course they don't. You have to appreciate the pleasures of repetition. I mean, if we didn't enjoy repetition, we wouldn't like music, would we? Living forever has certain advantages, but you have to get into the right rhythm. So yes it was the first few hundred years which were hardest, when I made the mistake of falling in love and then let boredom get the better of me.

After some two thousand years, you might suspect I'd seen it all, but you never have seen it all, believe me. After a while, you start appreciating the details. The little differences. Sometimes the big differences, too. Plumbing, for instance, and rapid transport. As we went into the renaissance, the enlightenment, the industrial revolution, things really did improve. What's more, women became prettier and smarter. Don't get me wrong, there were always smart women, but gradually large numbers of them became confident. This meant a steady overall improvement in relationships for me. My present wife is a theoretical physicist and her favourite feminist is Andrea Dworkin. She's read Proust four times in French and a couple of times in English. She knows all about my situation and is fascinated by it. It's a happy marriage. No children. I stopped having them a while ago, as soon as it became safe. In fact, if it wasn't for my unforgettable desire for one particular woman, things would be perfect now.

Yes, that is a problem. I've been in love with the same person for about fifteen hundred years and it never gets any better, but I'll tell you about that when the time comes. Would I have liked to have seen more of the world? Probably. But it's not my reason for wanting to travel. That, too, I'll tell you about. For now, let's just say I'm settled, if not totally content.

Not that I always feel so reconciled. I'm not as rich as you'd think I could be. I've lost as many fortunes as I've made. I've had my feckless moments, that I'm not particularly proud of. Luckily, because I was rarely of an Orthodox disposition, I also had plenty of guiltless fun. When you're being punished for eternity under the weight of a serious (and basically unjust) curse laid on you, you've already paid a high price, so what's to feel guilty? To say I've paid my debt to Jesus is to put it mildly. Not that it was actually Jesus who laid the curse on me in the first place. I hold no grudges, believe me. God was just paying back a debt to this guy, Joseph of Arimathea, who turned up in the settlement of Londinium with his spear and his cup and his followers. Admittedly, I could have been nicer to him, but frankly I found his claims a bit thin.

In those days the Romans were in charge of Britain as well as Palestine where I'd been born. You might not know much, but you'll have heard of the Roman Empire and doubtless, since you're actually able to read, you have a rough idea of the dates. By then I'd settled in the far West, near what's modern Tunis, and was a Carthaginian trader, practising my calling with reasonable success. I was planning a Mediterranean winter at home on the profits of our voyage, when this boat came beating up the Thames, striped sail swelling in the rainy wind, and deposited a bunch of sorry-looking men and women east of the wooden bridge, where most travellers came ashore. They clearly weren't used to the weather.

I was holding the fort, finishing off some business and waiting for my own ship to return from a side trip to Market Zion, Cornwall, to offload some woad and pick up some tin. Although the Romans were already building a city to rival the Empire's capital, with a huge forum, temples, law courts and villas, that bridge over to Southwark, along with a growing system of straight roads, they didn't really get down to the western end of the island much and were perfectly agreeable to us doing what trading we could with our traditional contacts, mostly hard-working tin-miners who wanted our various dyes and cotton, especially since we always gave them a decent deal on the tin.



When Joseph and his entourage came ashore on what in those days was already a very presentable wharf they looked as if they'd had a rough time of it. They were clearly from the same part of the world as me. They wore some nice quality robes – tight weaving, well co-ordinated colours, wool or cotton or a mixture of both. Gold bracelets and chains, rings with precious stones, nice silver circlets holding their hoods on. Their travelling chests also showed that they weren't peasants. Solid cedar, big brass fittings, names on the sides in Hebrew. Worth a bit, as I said to Joseph, recommending the safest inn. He'd heard that the settlement was as crime free as far as anywhere on the island was crime free at that time. Big Roman presence. They were a thieving, sweet-talking lot those Brits, and weren't above murdering you in your bed if they could get away with it. London was a new town then, based on a place called Lud's Dun, after one of their gods supposed to inhabit the hill above the river. Not much of a hill, really. But the Roman engineers had fortified it, given it some pretty good amenities and settled a bunch of their legionnaires there. It wasn't bad farming land, thanks to the Thames's tendency to flood. It would be a while before anyone started building serious artificial banks to improve the navigation and save the somewhat vulnerable real estate as it improved in value.

"You're a long way from home," I said, once I'd established they spoke Hebrew, "what brings you to this Godforsaken neck of the woods?"

"We're on a mission," confided the woman who introduced herself as the bearded oldster's wife (she couldn't have been more than twenty-five). "We're from Jerusalem. You know, where He was crucified and rose from the dead."

Nutters, I thought. Not many people now know that in Europe and North Africa Britain was considered to be the America of its day. The Far West, the frontier of the Empire, where you were free to make something of yourself. Anyone who'd been persecuted for their religion (and frankly there were a lot fewer persecutions at that time, the Romans being by and large a practical lot, as are most pantheists) tended to set off for Albion with plans to found a colony. The Romans had trouble getting anyone else to settle there and it was part of their usual method to encourage trade and industry wherever they could. You needed people to secure an Empire. Of course, there was the usual official Temple of the Imperial Cult and a temple to Diana on part of Ludgate Hill, but other religions were encouraged, because every able-bodied man could be called up for the army, if necessary. They needed people to help build roads. People to tax. The native Britons by and large weren't strong on that sort of forward-looking work, still being excited about farming, especially growing corn, which they were pretty good at. It hadn't taken most of them long to see the advantages of accepting the Romans, though I understood there were still a few tribes up north who were more warlike and regarded us Mediterranean types as interlopers, but this was more to do with propaganda being fed them by their rulers. Once they saw the reality, they tended to come in out of the cold and their rulers had no choice but to comply, if they wanted to have people they could still rule, at least nominally.

I understood a corn king myth when I heard it, even though I wasn't used to one being attached to the Greek and Jewish derived beliefs then prevalent in Palestine. So I accepted that the wrapped vessel Joseph carried was seed and that he would use his ceremonial hoe (the long thing all bound up in red cloth) to plant the first year's barley or whatever it was and get his little group started. There was plenty of room in those days, especially over near the East Coast where few local tribes had established towns on account

of the awful climate. But Joseph of Arimathea, as it turned out, was more interested in heading west. I advised him to keep the ship handy and wait until my friends got back, since they would be returning up the coast any day now. He seemed grateful for my recommendation and suggested that on the following Saturday (his Sabbath) I join them in prayer and so forth, but I politely told him that Moloch, with all his faults, was good enough for me, along with the variety of household gods I carried in my purse or had stuck up on a little shelf in my digs, only a short distance from the inn. I wasn't deeply religious, still aren't, but, in common with most of the people I knew and did business with, thought it best to stay on the safe side. Joseph, however, was distinctly dependent, one of those old-fashioned Jews you still ran across in Palestine where religion was enjoying a revival, as so frequently happens amongst conquered peoples who can't raise much in the way of an army. I've seen it happen a thousand times. He started preaching at me, in the way they do, and I nodded and smiled and said I'd think about it but that Saturday was my busiest period, when all the Brits came in from the outlying farms to sell their cereals and livestock.

And that would have been it if Jessie<sup>1</sup>, the afore-mentioned young wife, hadn't taken a fancy to me and asked me out of Joseph's hearing if there was a chance I might change my mind, in which case where would she be able to find me.

I don't know if you're familiar with the appearance of the average lantern-jawed British lady of the period, but let's just say they weren't my type whereas Jessie, all dark, smouldering eyes and black curly hair, was. I told her where I was staying. A house we had built, because we came and went so frequently, which was looked after by a displaced German, an ex-legionnaire and a reliable bloke whom we paid well. You could see it from the inn, because it was built above the flood zone, had two substantial storeys and a tiled roof of the Roman type. A lot of people actually thought it was a Roman's house and we were pretty proud of it, though it had no central heating and could get horribly smoky in winter, it didn't smell much since the privy was served by a pipe going directly into a small river they called the Flid and would become, of course, the Fleet.

I wasn't surprised, after I'd been in bed for about half-an-hour and the German was snoring his head off downstairs, to hear a tap on the door. Against my better instincts I threw on an old bit of toga and padded down to inch it open. It was her, sure enough. I checked what I could of the outside and let her in. "I've left him," she said. "I'm sick and tired of his raving on about this bloody cup and this bloody spear." She had brought them with her. I hadn't expected an actual runaway, just a quick roll on my palliasse until dawn, when I thought they'd be back on their boat and heading for Cornwall and Market Zion.

"No, love," I said. "I'm not helping you pinch his worldly goods, especially since he means to start a farm with them. We have Roman law here. I know what value these farmers place on that stuff."

"He's not a farmer," she said. "He's barmy. He's a Jesuite. He's brought a bit of the cross as well, but I couldn't see much use for that. He's awaiting what he calls the Rapture, due a hundred years after his prophet's death, and he wants to found a religious colony so he can be ready for the prophet when he turns up again. He married me under completely false pretences shortly after he left Arimathea. Described himself as a wine merchant. All for my dowry. He was on his uppers. Honest, I'm not loose. I just want to get back home

<sup>1</sup>Don't laugh, it was short for Jezebel, a popular name at that time in Carthage.



to Palestine. I'm not totally sure he doesn't plan to kill me. Human sacrifices and so on. Some of those loonies have already crucified themselves in what they call 'Imitation of the Kristos'. I can see you're surprised, but, yes, they're Greeks, or as good as."

"Greeks are generally so rational!" I was shocked. Then I shrugged. "Well, he'll get on all right in Cornwall if he plans a few human sacrifices. They all do it down there, especially when the harvest's been poor. So what's this, some sort of Sun god?"

"He's a Jesusite, I told you."

That was actually the first I'd heard of the Christians, though apparently they were already making enough trouble in Palestine and nearby places for the Romans to outlaw them. A lot had been rounded up. The Romans called them 'donkeys', which I gather was some sort of obscure pun. That was why Joseph of Arimathea and his little band had come here, so they could practise, as he said, without being persecuted. The hoe wasn't a hoe, as you know, but a spear. It had religious significance. It was supposed to be the one which had pierced Jesus's side on the cross and still had his blood encrusted on it. The cup, which was a very expensive looking item of gold, encrusted with jewels, was the one in which, for some reason known best to themselves, they had caught his blood. Apparently they were only a shade away from human sacrifice and cannibalism, because they drank human blood in their ceremonies. I was now doubly glad I hadn't accepted their invitation.

Anyway, the long and the short of it was that she'd had enough. She thought she was marrying a well-to-do bloke with a nice place in Arimathea. The house proved to be mortgaged to the hilt to pay scribes to turn out all his pamphlets, and before she knew it they were sailing across the Med into the Atlantic and beating up the Thames looking for a new Promised Land. He thought he was some sort of Moses. She had been seasick all the way. She thought she could buy my protection with the stolen gear. She had plenty of heavy currency as far as I was concerned. I was soft, I know, but I felt sorry for her. "Take the stuff back, love," I said, "and I'll look after you. Then we can go back to Palestine together and you can decide what you want to do there."

"You're Jewish, are you?" she said. "You don't look Jewish."

"I've lived in Carthage most of my adult life. My mum and dad died in a riot and my brother took me there. It's pretty peaceful now. Mostly modern, of course."

She liked the sound of Carthage and I liked the feel of her buxom, soft and definitely sensuous body. She said she'd get the spear and the cup back in the morning. He'd never know they'd gone. Meanwhile, we went to bed.

I was weak, I know it. I should have insisted on her returning the gear first, but my libido was already taking charge and I wasn't the first to find myself doing something very foolish because the pink lodestone couldn't help pointing north and dragging me with it. She was a very passionate young lady who hadn't experienced much fun with old Joseph. We had a lovely time. You'd think I wouldn't remember after some 2,000 years, but I do. Anyway, Jessie was special. She knew the whole Etruscan range, as we called it then. Very talented. I found it hard to believe that she had picked up everything from a middle-aged Jewish merchant, but she insisted she had. That and she had a vivid, creative imagination.

It won't surprise you to know that just after cock-crow, when we were warming up for a fresh arousal, the door downstairs banged open and I heard Gerald the German telling the intruders to bugger off or he'd call his Roman mates (of which he did have a lot) and send them all packing. I knew what was going on. I told Jessie to stay where she was and, putting on a robe, went downstairs where

I found Gerald nose to nose with a bellowing Joseph of Arimathea and some of his nerdy followers, getting all het up about blasphemy and sacrilege and so forth.

"Look," I said, producing the spear and the cup. "I swear I was going to have her bring this back after breakfast. I promise you I haven't nicked it." Whereupon the lot of them, men and women both, piled into the house and knocked me to the ground. Which would have been all right except I was pretty convinced that they were then going to stomp me and I wasn't having that. I pulled the covering off the spear, used it to get to my feet while Gerald engaged them from behind. I poked the spear at them, hoping to scare them off. Which was a big mistake since one of Joseph's followers, an unblinking, red-faced loony if ever I saw one, lunged towards me and got the spear in his shoulder. "Sorry," I said. What else could you say. But it wasn't enough.

"He has desecrated our holy relics. He has defiled the instruments of the world's salvation." Joseph was in full priestly mode. And he didn't stop at my defiling. He got himself into a right old state. I wouldn't have taken him all that seriously if, through the door, I hadn't seen big black clouds boiling up on the other side of the river. I was never superstitious, but I had to admit I was feeling a bit creeped out.

"Look," I said, "have the thing. Have them both and bugger off back to your ship before Gerald's mates start turning up." I held the cup and the spear out to them and they backed away, making various signs with their fingers. Then the spear started tingling in my hand. Then the cup began to do the same. A queer, itchy sort of feeling.

"Blasphemer, I condemn thee to live in this city for days without end until it shall cease to exist save as ash blowing across a barren wasteland and thou shalt never see thy homeland again!" roared Joseph, and raised his eyes to heaven.

I would have thought little more of this if a bolt of lightning hadn't suddenly zapped out of the sky, struck the tip of the spear, run up my arm and flung me against the far wall, dazed as I watched a somewhat smug Joseph collect up his goods and lead his followers out. After referring to Jessie as 'a Jezebel', which seemed a bit redundant, and saying 'I divorce thee' three times (evidently not above a bit of religious backsliding when it was convenient), Joseph led his followers back to the river. They returned to the ship and began rowing towards what is now Greenwich, the way they had come. I never saw him again. And at the time I couldn't even remember the substance of his curse, which I had to admit was pretty dramatic. He must have known there was a summer storm building. No plague of anything. No mysterious sickness. He had just been impressing his followers. I was glad to see the back of them.

Soon Jessie was stroking my forehead and helping me to a sip of nice Tuscan red while Gerald held the wineskin. "Let him keep his silly spear," she said, snuggling against me, "and his stupid cup. After all, we have each other."

That suited me. It was no more than I had expected in the first place. That afternoon she was as if anything even more passionate. The lightning strike had done no serious damage. In fact I felt invigorated, full of energy. Jessie was very impressed (and secretly so was I). It would be a couple of weeks before I understood the snags.

Some years later, I heard Joseph of Arimathea had established his colony and made quite an impression on the locals. But I never had a chance to go down and see it for myself. I'd become a Londoner, whether I liked it or not. ✧

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The novel is a work in progress and as yet has no publisher.





ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT DUNN

# Bassin the affair of the les Hivers

PARIS, 2006

## I Le Bassin Les Hivers

Until the late part of the last century, the area known as Les Hivers was notorious for its poverty, its narrow, filthy streets and the extraordinary number of crimes of passion recorded there. This district lay directly behind the famous Cirque d'Hiver, the winter circus, home to performing troupes who generally toured through the spring and summer months. Residents complained of the roaring of lions and tigers or the trumpeting of elephants at night, but the authorities were slow to act, given the nature of this part of the 11th arrondissement, whose inhabitants were not exactly influential.

The great canal, which brought produce to most of Paris, branched off from the Canal Saint Martin just below the Circus itself, to begin its journey underground. For many bargees, what they termed Le Bassin Les Hivers was the end of their voyage and here they would rest before returning to their home ports with whatever goods they had purchased or traded. Surrounding the great basin leaned a number of wooden quays and jetties, together with warehouses and high-ceilinged halls where business had always been done in gaslight or the semi-darkness created by huge arches and locks dividing the upper and the lower canal systems. The banks rose thirty meters or more, made of ancient stone, much of it re-used from Roman times, backing onto tall, windowless depositories built of tottering brick and timber. The sun could gain no access here and, at night, the quays and markets were lit by gas or naphtha and only occasionally by electricity. Beside the cobbled canal paths flourished the cafés, brothels and cheap rooming houses, as well as the famous Bargees' Mission and Church of Our Lady of the Waterways, operated since the 9th century by the pious and incorruptible White Friars. Like Alsatia, that area of London also administered by the Carmelites, it formed a secure sanctuary for all but habitual murderers.

The bargees not continuing under the city to the coast, and even to Britain, concluded their voyages here, having brought their cargoes from Nantes, Lyon or Marseille. Others came from the Low Countries, Scandinavia and Prussia, while those barge-folk regarded as the cream of their race had sailed waterways connecting the French capital with Moscow, Istanbul or the Italian Republics. The English bargees, with their heavy, red-sailed, ocean-going boats, came to sell their own goods, mostly Sheffield steel and pottery, and buy French wine and cheese for which there was always a healthy market in their chilly nation, chronically starved of food and drink fit for human consumption. It was common for altercations and fights to break out between the various nationalities and more than one would end with a mortal knife wound.

And so, for centuries, few respectable Parisians ever ventured into Les Hivers and those who did so rarely returned in their original condition. Even the Police patrolled the serpentine streets by wagon or, armed with carbines, in threes and fours. They dared not venture far into the system of underground waterways known collectively as the Styx. Taxi drivers, unless offered a substantial



commission, would not go into Les Hivers at all, but would drop passengers off in the Boulevard du Temple, close to the permanent hippodrome, always covered in vivid posters, in summer or winter. The drivers claimed that their automobile's batteries could not be recharged in that primitive place.

Only as the barge trade slowly gave way to more rapid commercial traffic, such as the electric railways and mighty aerial freighters, which began to cross the whole of Europe and even as far as America, Africa and the Orient, did the area become settled by the sons and daughters of the middle classes, by writers and artists, by well-to-do North Africans, Vietnamese, homosexuals and others who found the rest of Paris either too expensive or too unwelcoming. And, as these things will go, the friends of the pioneering bohemians came quickly to realise that the district was no longer as dangerous as its reputation suggested. They could sell their apartments in more expensive districts and buy something much cheaper in Les Hivers. Warehouses were converted into homes and shops and the quays and jetties began to house quaint restaurants and coffee houses. Some of the least stable buildings were torn down to admit a certain amount of sunlight.

By the 1990s, the transformation was complete and few of the original inhabitants could afford to live there any longer. The district became positively fashionable until it is the place we know today, full of bookshops, little cinemas, art-suppliers, expensive bistros, cafes and exclusive hotels. The animals are now housed where they will not disturb the residents and customers.

By the time Michel Houellebecq moved there in 1996, the transformation was complete. He declared the area "a meeting place of deep realities and metaphysical resonances." Though a few barge people still brought their goods to Les Hivers, these were unloaded onto trucks or supplied a *marché biologique* to rival that of Boulevard Raspail and only the very desperate still plied the dark, subterranean waterways for which no adequate maps had ever existed. The barge folk continued to be as clannish as always. Their secrets were passed down from one family member to another.

When he had been a lowly detective sergeant, Commissaire Lapointe had lived on the Avenue Parmentier and had come to know the alleys and twitters of the neighbourhood well. He had developed relationships with many of the settled barges and their kin and had done more than one favour to a waterman accused unjustly of a crime. They had respected Lapointe, even if they had not loved him.

A heavy-set man in a dark Raglan overcoat and an English cap, Lapointe was at once saturnine and avuncular. Lighting a Cuban cheroot, he descended from the footplate of his heavy police car, its motors humming at rest. Turning up his collar against the morning chill, he looked with some melancholy at the boutiques and restaurants now crowding the old wharfs. "Paris changes too rapidly," he announced to his long-suffering young assistant, the aquiline LeBec, who had only recently joined the special department. "She has all the grace and stateliness of an aristocratic whore, yet these stones, as our friend de Certau has pointed out, are full of dark stories, an unsavoury past."

Lapointe had become fascinated by psychogeography, the brainchild of Guy DeBord, who had developed the philosophy of 'flaneurism' or the art of *dérive*. DeBord and his followers had it that all great cities were the sum of their past and that the past was never far away, no matter what clever cosmetics were used to hide it. They had nothing but contempt for the electric trams, trains and cars which bore the busy Parisians about the city. Only by walking, by 'drifting', could one appreciate and absorb the history which one

inhaled with every breath, mixing living flesh with the dust of one's ancestors. Commissaire Lapointe, of course, had a tendency to support these ideas, as did many of the older members of the *Sûreté du Temps Perdu* and their colleagues abroad. This was especially true in London, where Lapointe's famous opposite number, 'Sir Seaton Begg', chief metatemporal investigator for the Home Office, headed the legendary Whitehall Time Centre, whose very existence was denied by Parliament, just as the Republic refused to admit any knowledge of the Quai d'Orsay's STP.

LeBec accepted these musings as he always did, keeping his own counsel. He had too much respect to dismiss his chief's words, but was also too much of a modern to make such opinions his own.

Reluctantly, Lapointe began to move along the freshly-paved quay until he had reached the entrance to a narrow canyon between two of the former warehouses. Rue Mendoza was no different from scores of similar alleys, save that a pale blue STP van stood outside one of its entrances, the red light on its roof turning with slow, almost voluptuous arcs while uniformed officers questioned the inhabitants of the great warren which had once housed grain and now was the residence of publicity directors, television producers and miscellaneous media people, all of whom were demanding to know why they could not go about their business.

Behind him on the canal, Lapointe could see a faint mist rising from the water and he heard a dozen radios and Vs, all tuned to the morning news programmes. So far, at least, the press had not yet got hold of this story. He stubbed out his cigar against a masonry-clad wall and put it back in his case, following the uniformed man into the house. He told LeBec to remain outside for a minute and question the angry residents as to their whereabouts and so on before following him upstairs. There were no elevators in this particular building and Lapointe was forced to climb several storeys until at last he came to a landing where a pale-faced young man, still in his pyjamas covered by a blue check dressing gown, stood with his back to the green and cream wall smoking a long, thin Nat Sherman cigarette, one of the white Virginia variety. He transferred the cigarette from right to left and shook hands with Lapointe as he introduced himself.

"Bonjour, M'sieu. I am Sébastien Gris."

"Commissaire Lapointe of the *Sûreté*. What's all this about a fancy dress party and a dead girl?"

Gris opened his mouth, but there was no air in his lungs. His thin features trembled and his pale blue eyes filled with helpless fury. He could not speak. He drew a deep breath. "Monsieur, I telephoned the moment I found her. I have touched nothing, I promise."

Lapointe grunted. He looked down at a pretty blonde girl, her fair skin faintly pockmarked, who lay sprawled in the man's hallway, a meter or so from the entrance to his tiny kitchen filling with steam from a forgotten kettle. Lapointe stepped over the body and went to turn off the gas. Slowly, the steam dissipated. He took a large paisley handkerchief from his pocket and mopped at his head and neck. He sighed. "No name? No identity? No papers of any kind?"

The uniformed man confirmed this. "Just what you see, Monsieur le Commissaire."

Lapointe leaned and touched her face. He took something on his finger and inspected it carefully. "Arsenic powder," he said. "And almost certainly cochineal for rouge." He was growing depressed. "I've only seen this once before." He recognised the work on her dress. It was authentic. Though unusually beautiful for the period and with an unblemished skin, she was as certainly an inhabitant of the early 19th century as he was of the 21st and, as sure as he was alive, she was dead, murdered by a neat cut across her throat.



"A true beauty and no doubt famous in her age. Murdered and disposed of by an expert."

"You have my absolute assurances, Monsieur, that her body was here when I got up this morning. Someone has done this, surely, to implicate me. It cannot be a joke."

Lapointe nodded gravely. "I fear, Monsieur Gris, that your presence in this building had little or nothing to do with the appearance of a corpse outside your kitchen." The young man became instantly relieved and began to babble a sequence of theories, forcing Lapointe to raise his hand as he dropped to one knee to inspect something clutched in the corpse's right fist. He frowned and checked the fingernails of the left fingers in which some coarse brown fibres had caught. The young man continued to talk and Lapointe became thoughtful and impatient at the same time, rising to his feet. "If you please, Monsieur. It is our job to determine how she came to die here and, if possible, identify her murderer. You, I regret, will have to remain nearby while I question the others. Have you the means to telephone your place of work?"

The young man nodded and crossed over to a wall bearing a fashionably modelled telephone. He gave the operator a number. As he was speaking, LeBec came in to join his chief. He shuddered when he saw the corpse. He knew at once why their department had been called in. "1820 or perhaps '25," he murmured. "What's that in her hand? A rosary? An expensive gold crucifix, too? Poor child. Was she killed here or there?"

"By the look of the blood it was there," responded his chief. "But whoever brought her body here is still amongst us, I am almost certain. He turned the crucifix over to look at the back. All he read there were the initials J.C. "Perhaps also her murderer." With an inclination of his massive head, he indicated where the bloodstains told a story of the girl being dragged and searched. "Did they assume her to be a witch of some sort? A familiar story. Her clothes suggest wealth. Yet she wears too much make-up for a girl of her age from a good family. Was she an adept or the daughter of an adept, maybe? What if she made her murderers a gateway into wherever they thought they were going and they killed her, either to be certain she told no others or as some sort of bizarre sacrifice? Yet why would she be clutching such an expensive rosary. And what about those fibres? Were they disguised? You know how they think, LeBec, as well as I do." He watched as his assistant took an instrument from an inside pocket and ran it over the girl's head and neck. Straightening himself, LeBec studied his readings, nodding occasionally as his instincts were confirmed.

The commissioner was giving close attention to the series of bloody marks leading away from the corpse to the front door of the apartment. Again he noted those initials on the back of the crucifix. "My God!" he murmured. "But why...?"

## II

### Monsieur Zenith: A Brief History

"I suspect our murderer had good reason to dispose of the corpse in this way," declared Lapointe. "My guess is that her face and body were both too well known for her to be simply dropped in the Seine, while the murderer did not wish to be observed moving her through the streets of Paris, either because he himself was also highly recognisable or because he had no easy way of doing what he needed to do. And no alibi. So, if not one himself, he called in an expert, no doubt a person already known to him."

"An expert? You mean such people understood about meta-

temporal transience in the 1820s?"

"Generally speaking, of course, very few of our ancestors understood such things. Even fewer than today. We are not talking of time-travel, which as we all know is impossible, but movement from one universe to another where one era has developed at a slower rate in relation to ours. Needless to say, we are not discussing our own past, but a period approximating our own present. That's why most of our cases take us to periods equivalent to our own 20th or early 21st century. So we are dealing here with a remote scale, far removed from our own. Another reason for our murderer to put as many alternative planes' scales between our own and theirs."

Lapointe was discussing the worlds of the multiverse, separated one from another by mass rather than time. Each world was of enormously larger or smaller scale to the next, enabling all the alternate universes which made up the great multiverse to coexist, one invisible to the other for reasons of size. Not until the great French scientist Benoit Mandelbrot had developed these theories had it become possible for certain adepts to increase or decrease their own mass and cross from one of these worlds to the other. Mandelbrot had effectively provided us with maps of our own brains, plans of the multiverse. This in turn had led to the setting up of secret government agencies designed to create policies and departments whose function was to deal with the new realities.

Now almost every major nation had some equivalent to the STP in some version of its own 21st century, apart from the United States, which had largely succeeded in refusing to enter that century in any significant sense and was forced to rely on foreign agents to cope with the problems arising from situations with their roots in the 21st century.

"But you are convinced, chief, that the murderer is French?"

"If not French, then they have lived in France for many years."

Used not to questioning his superior's instinctive judgements, LeBec accepted this.

As their electromobile sped them back to the Quai d'Orsay, Lapointe mused on the problem. "I need to find someone who has an idea of all the metatemporals who come and go in Paris. Only one springs to mind and that is Monsieur Zenith, the albino. You'll recall we have worked together once or twice before. As soon as I get back to the office, I will put through a call to Whitehall. If anyone knows where Zenith is, then it will be Sexton Blake."

Sexton Blake was the real name of the detective famously fictionalised as Sir Seaton Begg and Lapointe's opposite number in London.

"I did not know Monsieur Zenith was any longer amongst us," declared LeBec.

"There is no guarantee that he is. I can only hope. I understood that he had made his home in Paris. Blake will confirm where I can find him."

"I understand, chief, that he was in earlier days wanted by the police of several countries."

"Quite so. His last encounter with Blake, as a criminal, was during the London Blitz. He and his old antagonist fought it out on a cliff house whose foundations were weak. The fictional version of the case has been recorded as *The Affair of the Bronze Basilisk*. Zenith's body was lost in the ruins of the house and never recovered, but we now know that he returned to Jugo-Slavia where he fought with Tito's guerillas against the Nazis, was captured by the Gestapo before he could smoke the famous cyanide cigarette he always kept in his case and was found half-dead by the British when they liberated the infamous Milosevic Fortress in Belgrade, HQ of the Gestapo in the region. For his various efforts on behalf of the allied



war-effort, Zenith was given a full pardon by the authorities and in his final meeting with his old adversary Sexton Blake, both men made a bargain—Blake would allow no more stories of Zenith to be published as part of his own memoirs and Zenith would not publish his memoirs until fifty years after that meeting which was in August 26, 1946. Both men have been exposed to the same effects which conferred longevity upon them, almost by accident. That fifty years has now, of course, passed.”

“And Monsieur Zenith?” asked Le Bec as the car hummed smoothly under the arches into the square leading to their offices. “What has happened to him?”

“He has become a kind of gentleman adventurer, working as often with the authorities as against them and spending much of his time in tracking down ex-Nazis, especially those with stolen wealth, which he either returns in whole to their owners or, if it so pleases him, pays himself a ten percent ‘commission’. He will now sometimes work with my old friend Blake. His adventures will take him across parallel universes where he assumes the name of ‘Zodiac’. But he still keeps up with his old acquaintances from the criminal underworld, mostly through a famous London thieves’ warren known as ‘Smith’s Kitchen’ which now has concessions in Paris, Rome and New York. If anyone has heard a hint of the business here, it will be Zenith.”

“How will you contact him, chief?”

Lapointe smiled almost to himself. “Oh, I think Blake will confirm I know where he will be later this morning.”

### III

#### Familiar Names

A broken rosary, a silver crucifix bearing the initials J.C., a few coarse, brown fibres, some photographs of the corpse seen earlier at Les Hivers... One by one, Commissaire Lapointe laid the things before him on the bright, white table-cloth. He was sitting in a fashionable café, L’Albertine, situated in the Arcades de l’Opéra whose windows looked into a square in which a beautiful fountain played. Outside, Paris’s *haut-monde* strolled back and forth, conversing, inspecting the windows of the expensive shops, occasionally entering to make purchases. Across from him, sipping alternately from a small coffee cup or a glass of yellow-green absinthe, sat a most extraordinary individual. His skin was pale as alabaster. His hair, including his eyebrows, was the colour of milk, and his gleaming, sardonic eyes resembled the finest rubies. Dressed unusually for the age, the albino wore perfectly cut morning dress. A grey silk hat, evidently his, shared a shelf near the cash-register with Lapointe’s wide-brimmed straw.

“I am grateful, Monsieur, that you found time to see me,” murmured Lapointe, understanding the value the albino placed on good manners. “I was hoping these objects would mean more to you than they do to me. Evidently belonging to a priest or a nun—”

“Of high rank,” agreed Zenith continuing to look at the photographs of the victim.

“We also found several long black hairs, traces of heavy red lipstick of fairly recent manufacture.”

“No nun wore that,” mused Zenith. “Which suggests her murderess was disguised as a nun. In which case, of course, she is still unlikely to have worn lip-rouge. It was not the young woman’s?”

“Hers was from an earlier age altogether.” Lapointe had already explained the circumstances in which the corpse had been dis-

covered, as well as his guess at the time and date when she was murdered.

“So we can assume there were at least two people involved in killing her, one of whom at least had knowledge of the multiverse and how to gain access to other worlds.”

“And at least one of them can be assumed still to be here. Those footprints told us that part of the story. And some effort had been made to wrest the rosary from her fingers after she had arrived in Les Hivers.”

“The man – shall we assume him to be a priest?” Monsieur Zenith raised the rosary as if to kiss it, but then sniffed it instead. “J.C.? Some reference perhaps to the Society of Jesus?”

“Possibly. Which could lead us to assume that the Inquisition could have been at work?”

“I will see what I can discover for you, Monsieur Lapointe. As for the poor victim...” Zenith offered his old acquaintance a slight shrug.

“I believe I have a way of discovering her identity also, assuming she was not what we used to call a ‘virtuous’ girl,” said Lapointe. “I have already checked the police records for that period and no mention is made of a society disappearance that was not subsequently solved. Therefore, by the quality of her clothes, the fairness of her skin, condition of her hair, not to mention her extraordinary beauty, we must assume her to be either of foreign birth or some kind of courtesan. The cut of her clothes suggests the latter to me. There is, in that case, only one place to look for her. I must inspect our copy of De Buzet.”

Zenith raised an alabaster eyebrow. “You have a copy of the legendary Carte Bleue?”

“One of the two known to exist. The property of the Quai d’Orsay for almost two hundred years. Of little value, of course, in the general way. But now – it might just lead us to our victim, if not to her murderers.”

Monsieur Zenith extinguished his Turkish cigarette and rose to leave. “I will do what I can to trace this assumed cleric and if you can discover a reasonable likeness in La Carte Bleue, we shall perhaps meet here again tomorrow morning?”

“Until then,” declared Lapointe, standing to shake hands. He watched with mixed feelings as the albino collected his hat and stick at the door and strolled into the sunlit square, for all the world a flaneur from a previous century.

Later that same day, wearing impeccable evening dress as was his unvarying habit, Monsieur Zenith made his way to a certain unprepossessing address in the Marais where he admitted himself with a key, entering through a door of peeling green paint into a foyer whose interior window slid open and a pair of yellow, bloodshot eyes regarded him suspiciously. Zenith gave a name and a number and, as he passed through the second door, pulled on a black domino which, of course, did nothing to disguise his appearance but was a convention of the establishment. Once within, he gave his hat and cloak to a bowing receptionist and found himself in those parts of the catacombs made into a great dining room known to the aristocrats of the criminal underworld as La Cuisine de Smith. Here, that fraternity could exist unhindered and, while eating a passable dinner, could listen to an orchestra consisting of a violinist, a guitarist, double-bassist, an accordionist and a pianist. If they so wished they could also dance the exotic tango of Argentina or the Apache of Paris herself.

Zenith took a table in an alcove under a low stone ceiling that was centuries old and blew out the large votive candle which was





his only light. He ordered his usual absinthe and from his cigarette case removed a slender oval, which he placed between his lips and lit. The rich sweetness of Kashmiri opium poured from his nostrils as he exhaled the smoke and his eyes became heavily lidded. Watching the dancers, all at once he became aware of a presence at his table and a slender woman, whose domino only enhanced her dark beauty, an oval face framed by a perfectly cut 'page-boy' style. She laid a hand lightly on his shoulder and smiled.

"Will you dance, old friend?" she asked.

Although she was known to the world as Una Persson, Countess von Beck, Zenith thought of her by another name. He rejoiced inwardly at his good fortune. She was exactly whom he had hoped to meet here. He rose and bowed, then gracefully escorted her to the door where they joined in the rhythms of The Entropy Tango, that strange composition actually written for one of Countess Una's closest friends. In England, she had enjoyed a successful career on the music hall stage. Here, she was best known as a daring adventuress.

Arranging their wonderful bodies in the figures of the tango, the two carried on a murmured conversation. When the final chords rose to subtle crescendo, Zenith had the knowledge he had sought.

At his invitation, Countess Una joined him, the candle was relit and they ordered from the menu. This was to prove dangerous for, moments after they began to eat, a muffled shot stilled the orchestra and Zenith noted with some interest that a large calibre bullet had penetrated the plaster just behind his left shoulder. The bullet had flattened oddly, enough to tell him that it was made of an unusual alloy. Countess Una had recognised it, too. It was she who blew out the candle so that they no longer made an easy target.

They spoke almost in chorus.

"Vera Pym!"

Who else but that ruthless mistress of Paris's most notorious gang would ignore Smith's rules of sanctuary, respected even by the police?

But why had she suddenly determined to destroy the albino?

Zenith frowned. Could he know more than he realised?

#### IV

#### Fitting the Pieces

Commissaire Lapointe was unsurprised by Zenith's information when they met at L'Albertine the next morning. Vera Pym (believed to be her real name) was the acknowledged leader of a gang which had in its time had several apparent leaders. Only Pym, however, had remained in control of the *Vampyres* throughout their long career. She was one of a small group capable (to one degree or another) of moving between the worlds and living for centuries. The rank and file of her gang, for all their sinister name, had no such qualities. Some did not even realise she was their leader, for she generally put her man of the moment in that position. Occasionally, she changed her name, though generally it remained a simple anagram of her gang's. And she had many disguises. Few were absolutely sure what she looked like or, indeed, if she was always the same person. Several times she had been captured, yet she had always been able to escape.

"She has been a thorn in the side of the authorities for well over a century," agreed Lapointe. "And, of course, she is one of the few we can suspect in this case."

"What's more," added Zenith, "she has recently been seen in the company of a man of the cloth. An Abbé by all accounts."



"My God!" Lapointe passed a photocopied picture across the table. "Tell me what you make of that!"

Frowning, the albino examined the picture. "Not much, I'm afraid. Is she...?"

"The likeness is remarkably similar to our victim. Her name was Sarah Gobseck, a Jewess better known in her day as La Torpille."

"A surprisingly unfeminine sobriquet."

"I agree. But at that time a torpedo was something which lay in the water, half-hidden by the waves, until hit by a ship. Whereupon it would explode and as likely as not sink the ship. She is most famous from Balzac's *History of the Courtesans*."

"Ah!" Zenith sat back, drawing on his cigarette. "So that's our Abbé! Carlos Herrera!"

"Exactly. Vautrin himself. Which would explain the initials on the rosary. So he is here now with Madame Pym. Which also explains anomalies in his career as reported by Balzac. Vautrin is Jacques Collin, the master criminal, who vanished from the historical records at about the time our 'Torpedo' became an inconvenient embarrassment to more than one gentleman. Suicide was suspected, I know. But now we have the truth."

"No doubt Collin also vanished into the 21st century, since Balzac becomes increasingly vague concerning his identity or his exploits and appears to have resorted to unlikely fictions to explain him. He knew nothing of La Pym, of course!"

"But this does nothing to tell us of their whereabouts," mused Zenith.

"Nor," added Lapointe, "how they can be brought to justice."

For some moments, Zenith was lost in thought, then he glanced at his watch and frowned. "Perhaps you will permit me, Monsieur le Commissaire, to solve that particular problem."

Lapointe became instantly uncomfortable. "I assure you, Monsieur Zenith, that while I appreciate all your help, this is ultimately a Police matter. I would remind you that you are already risking your life. La Pym has marked you as her next victim."

"A fact, Monsieur Lapointe, that I greatly resent. Because of a promise I made to a certain great Englishman, I regret to say I have been forced to live the life of a bourgeois professional, almost a tradesman, and no longer pursue the life I once relished. However, in this case a certain personal element has entered the equation. I feel obliged to satisfy my honour and perhaps avenge the death of that beautiful young creature who, through no fault of her own, was forced into a profession for which she had only abhorrence and which resulted, at least according to de Balzac's history, in an unholy, early and wholly undeserved death."

"My dear Monsieur Zenith, if I may make so bold, this remains a matter for the justice system."

"But you are helpless, I think you will agree, certainly in the matter of Collin. He will evade you, as no doubt also will La Pym."

"If so, then we will continue to hunt for them until we can arrest them and prove their guilt or innocence in a court of law."

The albino bowed from where he sat. "So be it." And with that he got to his feet and, making a polite gesture, bade the Policeman au revoir.

Commissaire Lapointe immediately made his way back to the Quay d'Orsay where LeBec awaited him. He read at once the concern in his superior's face.

"What's up, chief?"

Lapointe was in poor humour and in no mood to explain, but he knew he owed it to LeBec to say something. "I'm pretty sure that Zenith has an idea of our murderers' whereabouts and intends to

take the law into his own hands. He is convinced that he knows who they are and how to punish them. We must find him and follow him and do all we can to thwart him!"

"But, chief, if he can deliver justice where we cannot...?"

"Then all our civilisation stands for nothing, LeBec. Already the Americans and the English have adopted the language of the blood feud in their foreign affairs, demanding eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth – but that is nothing more or less than a reversion to the most primitive form of law available to our ancestors. France cannot follow the Anglo-Saxons down that road and I will do all in my power to make sure we do not!"

"And yet..."

"LeBec, for twenty centuries, we have steadily improved our civilisation until our complex system of justice, allowing for subtle interpretation, for context, for motive and so on, has become paramount. It is the law I live to serve. Zenith, for all he behaves with courage and honour, would defy that justice, just as he used to, and I will have no part in it. Though I lack his resources and knowledge – even, perhaps, his courage – I must stop him. In the name of the Law."

Understanding at last, LeBec nodded gravely. "Very well, chief, but what are we to do?"

"Our best," declared Lapointe gravely. "I suspect that Countess von Beck, your own distant cousin, is still helping him in this. For that reason, I put a man to follow her. If we are lucky she will lead us to Zenith. And Zenith, I sincerely hope, will lead us to the murderers – to Vautrin and Vera Pym – while there is still a chance of our apprehending them."

"Where are they going, chief? Do you know?"

"My guess is that, since they failed to kill Zenith last night, they will attempt to return from whence they came. But how they will make that attempt remains a mystery to me."

## V

### Zenith's Resolution

Una Persson's car had been seen heading up the Boulevard Voltaire towards the Boulevard du Temple, carrying at least two passengers, so it was for the Marais that the Policemen headed in their own Citroen ECXVI, perhaps the fastest car in France, powered by three enormous super-charged batteries. The sleek, black machine had them outside the Cirque d'Hiver within minutes, but from there they had to run towards the canal and down the steps to the great basin by now, at twilight, alive with dancing neon and neurotic music. There at last Lapointe caught a glimpse of his quarry and pointed.

Zenith, as was appropriate, wore white tie and tails, carrying a slender silver-tipped ebony cane, an astonishing sight to LeBec who had never seen him thus. "My God, we are pursuing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers!" joked Lapointe's assistant.

The Commissaire found no humour in this. "This could be a dangerous business, lad. There was never any profit in making that man one's enemy. He was once the most dangerous thief in Europe and Europe is lucky that he gave his word to an old friend to forsake his life of crime or he would still be causing us considerable grief!"

Suitably chastened LeBec panted. "What is he? Some kind of vampire?"

"Only in legends. And not in any way associated with Vera Pym and her gang," Lapointe continued to push his way through the crowd as the evening grew darker. "At least, I have some idea now



where he is heading. There must have been a gateway created by the murderers..."

Crossing the old wooden bridge over the basin, they saw what had brought the crowd here. It was a huge black barge of the kind once used in the canal folk's funerals, two decks high. "It came up out of there – not ten minutes ago!" said an underdressed young woman wearing garish face-paint. "It just – just appeared!"

Lapointe stared into the still-mysterious maw of the underground canal. "So that's where they've been hiding. A veritable water-maze," he muttered. "Hurry, LeBec, for the love of God!"

At last, they had forced a passage through the crowds, back to the tall looming house in rue Mendoza where the corpse of Sarah Gobseck had been discovered. As Lapointe had guessed, the two ahead of them had abandoned their own car and were hurrying towards the entrance of No.15 into which they swiftly disappeared.

By the time Lapointe and his assistant had reached the door, it was locked and bolted. Much time was wasted as they attempted to rouse the residents and gain access.

Now, at the very top of the building, they could hear a strange, single note, as of an organ, which began to drown almost all other sound and made communication difficult. As they neared the fifth floor, they became aware of a violent, pulsing light filling the stairwell below. It seemed to pour through the skylight and have its origins on the roof. The air itself had an unnatural quality, a strong smell of vanilla and ozone which reminded Lapointe irrationally of the corniche at Bourdeaux where as a boy he had holidayed with his family.

Next, an unnatural pressure began to exert itself on the men, as if gravity had somehow tripled in intensity and they moved sluggishly with enormous effort up to the final landing where Monsieur Gris, an expression of terror on his features, was attempting to descend the stairs. Behind him, a ladder had been pulled down from the ceiling and now gave access to an open door in the roof.

They were at last straggling the ladder to the roof. There, amongst the old chimneys and sloping leads, stood four people – a vicious-looking woman whose beauty was marred by a rodent snarl and a tonsured priest whom Lapointe immediately identified as Vautrin – otherwise known as Jacques Collin, but here disguised as the Abbé Carlos Herrera!

Confronting Vautrin and his co-conspirator Vera Pym were Zenith the albino and the Countess Una von Beck. All were armed – Vautrin with a rapier and Pym with a modern automatic pistol. Zenith carried his ebony sword-stick while Countess von Beck had raised a Smith and Wesson .45 revolver which she pointed at the snarling leader of the Vampyres.

And, if this scene were not dramatic enough, there yawned behind Pym and Vautrin a strange, swirling gap in the very fabric of time and space which mumbled and cried and moved with a nervous bubbling intensity.

"Sacred Heaven!" murmured Lapointe. "That is how they got here and that is how they intend to leave. They have ripped a rent through the multiverse. This is not a gateway in the usual sense. It is as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to the supporting walls of Saint Peter's! Who knows what appalling damage they have created!"

Then, suddenly, Vautrin had moved, his long, slender blade driving for Zenith's heart. But the albino's instincts were as sharp as always. Dodging the thrust, he drew his own rapier of black, vibrating steel which seemed to sing a song of its own. Mysterious scarlet runes ran up and down its length as if alive. He replied to

Vautrin's thrust with one of his own.

Parrying, Vautrin began to laugh – a hideous obscenity of sound which somehow seemed to blend with that awful light pouring through the rift in multiversal space their crude methods had created. "Your powers of deduction remain superb, Zenith, even if your taste in friends is not. She was indeed 'La Torpille'. I thought I had driven her to self-destruction, but she failed me in the end. I struck her down, as you and the others have guessed, and then, to make sure the body was never discovered, and seen to be murdered, I employed the services of Madame Vera Pym here. She is an old colleague."

Now Lapointe had drawn his revolver and was levelling it. "Stop, Monsieur Vautrin. In the name of France! In the name of the Law! Stop and put down your weapon. On your own admission, I arrest you for the murder of Mademoiselle Sarah Gobseck!"

Again, Vautrin voiced that terrible laugh. "Prince Zoran, Commissaire Lapointe, your powers of deduction are impressive and I know I face two wonderful opponents, but you will not, I assure you, stop my escape. The multiverse herself will not permit it. And put up your weapons. You cannot kill me any more than I can kill you!" He used Zenith's given name, Zoran, which went with the title he had long-since renounced, almost challenging the albino to prove his humanity.

Then, perhaps goaded by this, Zenith struck again, not once but twice, that black streak of ruby-coloured runes licking first at Vautrin's heart and then, as she raised her pistol to fire, at Vera Pym's.

The woman also began to laugh now. Together, their hideous voices created a kind of resonance with the pulsing light and almost certainly kept the gateway open for them. Vera Pym was triumphant. "You see," she shouted, "we are indestructible. You cannot take our lives in this universe, nor shall you be able to pursue us where we are going now!"

And then, she stepped backwards into that howling vortex and vanished. In a moment, Vautrin, also smiling, followed her.

For a sudden moment there was silence. Then came a noise, like a huge beast breathing. The roof was lit only by the full Moon and the stars. Lapointe felt the weight disappear from him and knew vast relief that circumstances had refused to make Zenith a murderer and Countess Una his accomplice, for then he would have been obliged to arrest them both.

"We will find them," he promised as the snoring vortex dwindled and disappeared. "And if we do not, I expect they will find us. Have no doubt, we shall be waiting for them." He raised exhausted eyes to look upon a bleak, emotionless albino. "And you, Monsieur, are you satisfied you cannot be revenged on the likes of Vautrin?"

"Oh, I fancy I have taken from him something he valued more than life," said the albino, sheathing his black rapier with an air of finality. He shared a thin, secret smile with the Countess von Beck. "Now, if you'll forgive me, Monsieur le Commissaire, I will continue about my business while the night is young. We were planning to go dancing." And, offering his arm to Countess Una, he walked insouciantly down the stairs and out of sight.

"What on Earth did he mean?" LeBec wondered.

Commissaire Lapointe was shaking his head like a man waking from a doze. He had heard about that black and crimson sword cane and believed he might have witnessed an action far more terrible, far more threatening to the civilisation he valued than any he had previously imagined.

"God help him," he whispered, half to himself, "and God help those from whom he steals..." ✧



ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

# Abecedario

The day my father was reduced, the doctors and nurses couldn't get me out of his hospital room. But they sure didn't want to come in after me. They had been in this business a long time now; they had seen people in my state do just about everything and, all too often, they were the ones on the receiving end of this kind of temporary insanity. It wasn't their problem if I ruined my father's chance to be reduced. I had signed away my rights the same day my father was admitted. They had it all in writing.

But I wasn't so deranged that I didn't know what was happening. I knew that if I didn't get out of there soon and let them do their work, my father would physically and irreversibly die. Of course, part of me wanted that. A big part. But the bigger, more socially-acceptable part of me felt that even though reduction isn't death, is infinitely better than death, it's still the end of something. Really, it's the end of almost everything. He wouldn't even have consciousness; all that would be left of him was a presence, a tortoise-like persistence without the complexities of human life to color it. And I wasn't done with him. I wanted him to be completely alive, responsive and responsible, an agent in the world. I mean, once he was reduced, how would I be able to take my revenge?

But who was I kidding? All that was left of him by then was a head on a pillow. I should have thought of all of this three months ago, back before they started amputating everything from the neck down, preparing him to live without any kind of body at all. The choice, now, was between reduction or extinction. And that wasn't really a choice, despite what my id kept urging me to do.

The door opened behind me, and in came Travis, the physician's assistant who had been with my father since he was admitted to Madison General. Travis had on what amounted to a translucent powder blue garbage bag with built-in arms and legs (it was important, once the reduction began, that the room be as germ-free as humanly possible) and a breathing apparatus like a fighter pilot's covering his face. It gave him an evil, insectival look. He had entered the room to keep me from making, from his perspective anyway, the biggest mistake of my life. He pantomimed how sorry he was for me – he had to pantomime, since the breathing apparatus didn't allow him to talk to me – but he tapped his wrist to remind me that time was short, and then he pointed to the door to remind me of all the doctors and nurses who stood out there, waiting to come in and begin the procedure. I remember wondering to myself whether part of everyone's training in the hospital included lessons in mime.

"I know," I said to him. But I didn't move.

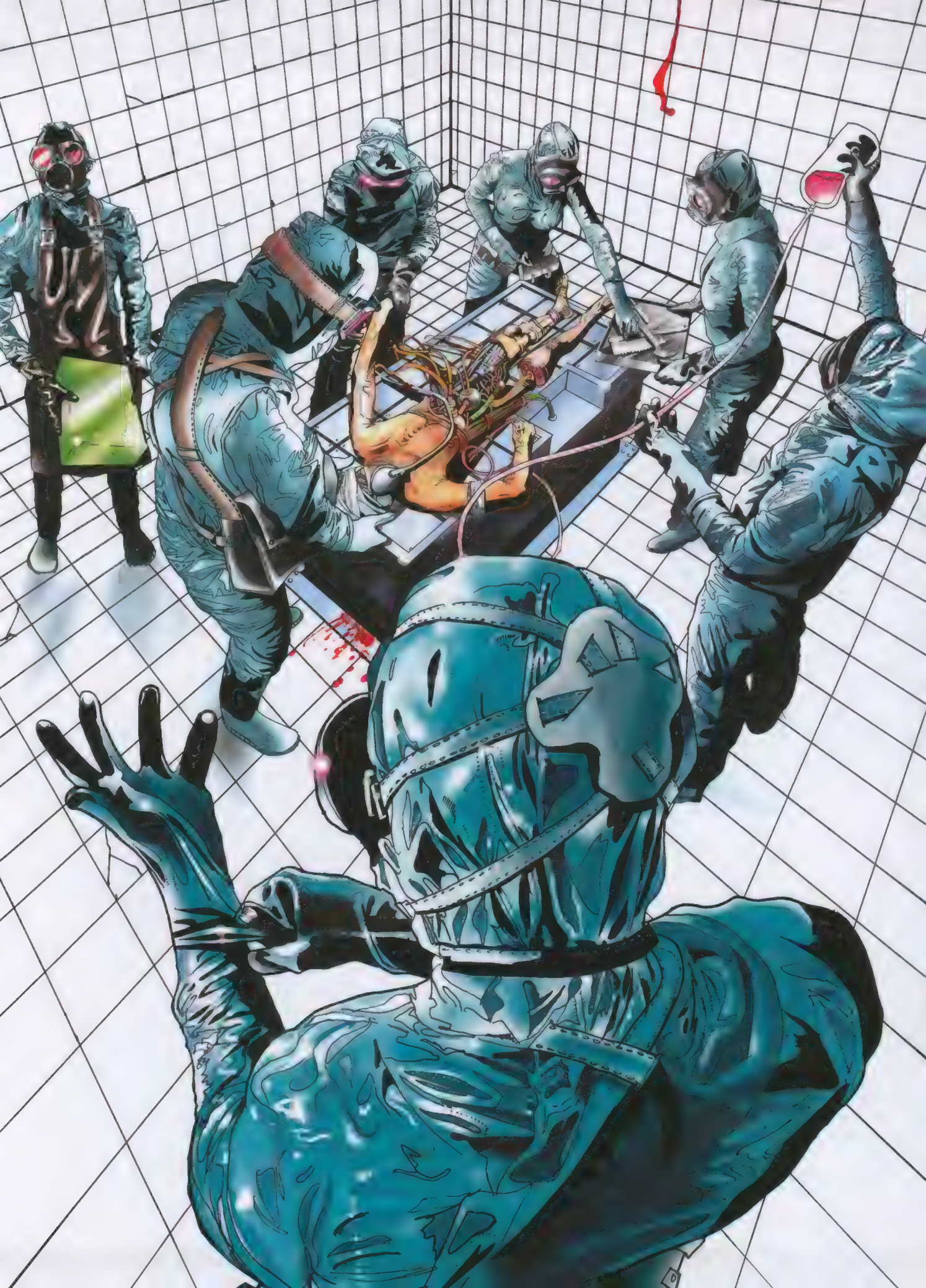
Travis mimed again that we were running out of time. I could follow his line of sight to the brain monitors behind me, but there was no need to look. They were beeping incessantly, a panicked tattoo of computer terror that could only mean one thing: imminent brain death. Travis mimed the regret I would feel if I didn't clear out right away, and that regret, he further mimed, would conjure the sort of pain that stays with you forever, even after you yourself have been reduced and are sitting on your grandchildren's mantle. He was a very good mime.

"I know," I said again. And began to cry. That did the trick – like I had finally found the right wire to cut on the bomb. Travis came over and put an arm on me; the blue garbage bag crunched noisily as he did so. After a few moments, I composed myself enough to vacuum the escaping tears back into my eye sockets and button my suit jacket and straighten with resolve. Then, with Travis's arm still on my shoulder, we resolutely walked out of the room.

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**Carlos Hernandez** has made one previous appearance in *Interzone*. Since then, he's taken a new job as an English professor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which means he can now take summers off – the local bars are bracing for impact. The publication of his co-written ludic cut-up of a novel, *Abecedarium*, is fast approaching (details will be available at [chiasmusmedia.net](http://chiasmusmedia.net) soon).







As soon as we made our exit, all of the blue garbage bags that had been waiting outside poured into Dad's room. Travis and I walked slowly to the waiting room. He guided me to an orange vinyl chair and gently pushed my shoulders until I sat. Then he freed himself from the garbage bag and mask. He had mask-hair, with odd, meringue-like peaks defying gravity all over his head, and he looked tired – his face was so swollen with sleeplessness it looked like it was trying to detach itself from his skull. But he looked a lot better when he smiled, and for my benefit he grinned a big, sincere grin. Then he took a seat next to me and put a hand on my knee and said, "Well, they've started. This is the beginning of the end. The hard part is over now."

"Says you. It's not your dad being turned into a box in there."

I was trying to sound nasty to cover up other things, but Travis saw right through me. He gave my knee an ironic squeeze and, with a gentle, almost oneiric voice, said, "It's not like you ever loved him."

We looked at each other. Then I humphed. And then I said, "True. But what kills me is I never really got a chance to hate him."

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A lot of people have shrines in their homes for their reduced family members: walls, corners, even entire rooms dedicated to the partially departed. Some people are positively Chinese in the reverence they show their ancestors, and most people at least try to keep up appearances. At the minimum, most people provide tidy and tasteful spaces for family monstrosities – the half-meter-long, elaborately carved wooden boxes that house all that remains of the dearly – and not-so-dearly – departed. Of course, what remains is, depending on your perspective, either everything that matters, or not very much at all: what remains of the reduced is exactly however much of the self can fit onto a hard drive. A quantum hard drive, to be fair – a top-of-the-line, state-of-the-art, bleeding edge, future-is-now hard drive that is so complex no one in the world is exactly clear on how it works. Which is maybe why we're so willing to believe that it does.

I used to look at the monstrosities in other peoples' homes and feel a little wistful, a little jealous. My mother and older brother were all the family I had, and, when each of them had to choose, neither of them chose to be reduced. My mother was resigned to death in that healthy, old-world way that has never expected much from medicine except huge bills and bad news. She said to me, "Oh, you've had enough of me already. The whole world has had enough of Flor Otero. What do you want me hanging around for? And anyway, I'd get claustrophobic in that little box. I need to stretch my bones a little, you know? How can anyone fit in those little things? I always feel sad when I look at those, like they just jam the deceased into these tiny coffins like canned ham, because there's not enough room in the world anymore to even die right. Ay, hijo, no!"

My brother, on the other hand, was just broken, was simply done with life. "Maybe fifteen years ago, when I was happy," he told me. "Maybe then I would've wanted it. I used to be a funny guy back then. Remember? It would've been a million laughs to keep me around, cracking jokes from some shelf and busting on whoever walked by, like those guys in the dunking cages at the carnival. But now? I'd just be a depressing sack of shit on the wall. Who'd want a guy like me to be exvisible? Oh, great, you get to penetrate the deep, hidden recesses of my being and find out that I'm a bitter misanthrope with nothing good to say about nobody. Look Juan: better just to cremate me." He gave me a smile then that was the exact opposite of smiling. "Yeah, cremation. That seems more my speed these days."

They were all the blood family I thought I had left to me, so I didn't think I'd ever have a monstrosity or a reduction shrine in my home. Well, you can buy other peoples' monstrosities if you

want them bad enough, the same way people buy uncut books by the pound to make their massive libraries look full. Some people get sick of being part of a family and want a clean break, a fresh start; sometimes the reduced were real sons of bitches who had the money to pay for the procedure, but who no one really wants to keep around; some people just suffer too much having the people they so dearly loved around in such a vitiated form. So, for whatever reason, some people sell off their related reduced, and collectors and interior decorators gobble them up. But that's not my style. So, up until three months ago, I thought the only way I'd be grieving the loss of my family was through the old-fashioned way: memory and absence. But then the father I'd never met before called to introduce himself and tell me he was dying.

Reduction is expensive, takes months of preparation, and requires the body to be utterly destroyed in the process: so no one who belongs to a religion that requires the body to remain intact after death can be reduced. Dad didn't have religion, had come to terms with his pancreatic cancer, and, in his fanciful way, actually enjoyed the idea of not leaving a body behind. The only thing holding him back from reduction was the money.

"I'm doing this for you," he said to me the first time I met him. We met where everyone goes these days for first dates, white-collar drug

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### Reduction takes months of preparation, and requires the body to be utterly destroyed

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deals and awkward encounters of every stripe: the neighborhood Lava Java. Before that sentence, we had been speaking in mmm-hmms and humphs and one-sentence declaratives, sipping our hypercharged lattes during every pause. Luckily, those lattes were huge. There was a lot of space to fill in our conversation.

He didn't look like me, and he didn't look like my brother. He just looked old, like a generic white old man, like he could have been any white man's old man. But neither my brother nor I look white; we both take after my mother. And so everything about him screamed imposter; his last name was Fagin, for chrissakes. But the DNA tests checked out. I'd insisted on them before I would talk to him, I picked the lab and I paid for them, and so now I was bound by the results. This generic white man was my father. Science said so.

But only by science's standards. "You're not doing this for me," I said back to him, after staring a long time into my latte. "You've never done anything for me, ever. You didn't even exist in my world. You're doing this for yourself. Because you're scared to die, and you're broke, and you have nowhere else to turn. What most amazes me is that you had the gall to search me out at all. How did you think I would feel about you? I truly have no idea why you contacted me, or how you thought this would go."

"I contacted you because I thought you might want to know your father before it was too late. I'm dying, you know."

"I know. You told me already. But so what? I don't want to be cruel, but, really, you're nothing to me. Tens of thousands of people die every day, and I wish they didn't have to, I really do, I wish the world was a nicer place to everyone. But you know, that's just the way it goes. I'm not responsible for every death in the world. You are just one of the many billions of people who are going to die that aren't my responsibility. You aren't one of *my* people. You're nothing to me."

"Oh, I'm something. You may not know it yet, but I am." He had a penchant for making theatrical pronouncements; I'd talked to him for twenty minutes and already I knew this. "I'm your history, Juan.



And every man needs his history."

I put my latte down. "What a bunch of shit. What an utter load of crap. 'Every man needs his history.' You want to talk history? My history is that my piece of shit dad left my angel of a mom after impregnating her, but before he ever laid eyes on his second son. The end. The only other history I need from you I already have: the genetic tests I've gotten have told me what cancers and other congenital health risks I have thanks to your shitty genes. And that's it. All the rest is just fluff, just stories. Who cares if you were a used car salesman or ambassador to Finland or if your turn-ons include walks on the beach and French Symbolist poetry? Your history means nothing to me. They're like a form of entertainment or something. And you know what? I can't imagine there is a single thing that has happened to you that I would find entertaining."

After a long silence, he said, "I actually was a used car salesman for a while."

"Of course you were."

"I made a mistake contacting you."

"Of course you did. The latest in what I am sure is a very long line of them."

He stood and paid and smiled one last time and left. I didn't smile back or shake his hand or even stand.



Once he was gone, I grinned. Big. And then I laughed a little to myself. And then I laughed out loud and pumped both fists in the air and didn't care who was staring. I looked heavenward and said to my mom, "That was for you, Mami," and then I looked to her right and said to my brother, "And you too Alex." And then I ordered the richest chocolate cake they had at Lava Java. Best piece of cake I'd had in a long time.

A week later I emailed my dad and told him I would pay to have him reduced.

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I work as a controller, which is one of the most misleading job titles anybody can have. I am the controller. I will use my mind-control powers to control you.

Like most controllers, I never use my vacation days, so I had plenty in reserve to witness him being whittled down to almost nothing. We went together to the doctor's office to learn more about what, exactly, was involved in the process of reduction. The doctor I found for him – despite how I felt about him, I got him the best in the business – was named Dr Mariel Trebuchet. Hilarious name for a doctor. But maybe anyone's name becomes hilarious when you give a person so much power over yourself.

She was to see him through the entire procedure, start to finish. The amputations themselves would be fairly straightforward: first the legs, then the arms, then slowly up the torso, up to the neck, and then – well, if everything worked out, his consciousness would migrate into the monstrosity and he would achieve the closest thing to immortality we have right now.

Risks? As with any amputation, infection and gangrene were always a concern, but they would monitor him carefully; and anyway, it wasn't as if the body had to make it very long before it became dispensable. Pain? Only phantom limbs: "Though," said Dr Trebuchet, becoming appropriately grave, "I shouldn't minimize deafferentation pain. The pain is real – pain and the perception of pain are exactly the same thing – and if mismanaged the pain can

be severe enough to jeopardize the entire reduction process. But besides the pain, there is a more philosophical concern: the more limbs we remove, the more 'phantom-like' the patient feels. Some patients lose their sense of self the further we go in the process. And that may threaten their ability to migrate."

The migration itself, however, was by far the most difficult part of the entire process. Everything depended on my father's ability to learn how to keep his consciousness intact – without a body – long enough to move into the hard drive that would house his soul forevermore. There would be months of therapy and computer-assisted modeling that would help to prepare him. And each time he had a limb removed, it would be replaced by a prosthetic equivalent that he would learn to control. Eventually, his entire body would be completely substituted by a full somatium: a neck-down replica of the human body that would keep his head alive until his consciousness migrated. But some people just couldn't get the hang of it, couldn't believe enough in their own existences to insist on their own continuance without a body to anchor them. All that was left for them was to go back to the corporeal world and die from whatever it was they were dying from. The hospital, ever so kind, even had their amputated limbs reattached before they left, so they could go meet their Maker exactly as that Maker had made them.

But Dr Trebuchet was optimistic that my father would migrate successfully. "He is imaginative, playful, resourceful and quick, without the slightest hint of depression or doubt" she said to us, flipping through the pages of his psychological profile. She looked up at him as she completed her thought: "A near-ideal candidate."

"Near-ideal?" he said, feigning outrage. "Come on, doc! Where are you going to find a better specimen than this?" He pressed his thumbs to his chest and gave her a game-show-host smile.

She laughed, put down his file and reached across her desk; he took the hint and took her hands in his. "Mr Fagin, believe me, 'near-ideal' is the highest of compliments. The only 'ideal' candidates out there, strictly from the perspective of making a successful migrating into a monstrosity, are crazy people, psychotics, people already lost inside their own heads."

"Huh. Lost in his own head? Yeah, that sounds about right." I had meant it as a joke, but all of the humor and fine feeling in the room, that had been so carefully and professionally cultivated by Dr Trebuchet, died. Convulsingly. Like a housecat snacking on rat poison.

But then, rather unexpectedly, Dr Trebuchet reached across the desk again, this time to take my hands in hers. "Mr Otero, I can only imagine how difficult this is for you, to see your father in this state, to try and be strong for him while at the same time trying to reconcile what his illness has done to him. He is your father, right? The big, strong man who carried you around on his shoulders and protected you and taught you how to be a man is now in the fight of his life. All I can say is that you are doing a very great thing for him, helping him to live beyond the time his body can allow. And that we have psychologists on-hand to assist you, should you feel the need to talk to someone."

And, after a calculated pause, she added, "And, of course, you have my card. You should also feel free to call me whenever you'd like."

The whole time she had been mischaracterizing my relationship with my father, she had been rubbing my ring-finger with her thumb, as if she wanted to be sure I wasn't wearing an invisible wedding band.

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The one thing my father and I could talk about was the procedure. During the last months of his existence as a complete person, we



signed a lot of papers and I signed a lot of checks, but, after we had done business and the doctors and nurses and Travis the physician's assistant cleared out of the room, my father's head would sink into his pillow and my chin would sink a little deeper into my palm, and he would look at the ceiling and I would stare at the floor, and nothing would get said.

He'd try sometimes. Sometimes he'd get as far as saying, "Son, I..." But I would cut him off: "Don't call me that. You don't get to call me that." And then he'd swallow hard and let his head submerge into his pillow like a depth charge and let himself be engulfed by the oceanic silence I created.

But the procedure we could talk about. Turning a person into a box that thinks it's a person has to be a little bit interesting, even if you don't happen to like the person being boxed up. There was a lot to learn, a lot of newness to manage. It was interesting.

For instance, shopping for the monstrosity was interesting. My father and I went together. The place we went looked to me like some bizarre mixture of funeral parlor and cigar shop. There was an austere and reverential quality to the decor, with dark cherrywood paneling and religious iconography tastefully placed throughout the showroom – but the fact is that monstrosities look quite a lot like high-end humidors. And the manager, in his nine-piece suit and shoes so polished they looked like windows to an alternate universe, seemed to me equally ready to serve as either a mortician or cigar purveyor. You could tell by his teeth he was a smoker.

I was interested in the technical specifications of monstrosities: what sort of processor arrays do they typically include? What sort of storage? Is automatic backup built into the base price? What sort of cooling system comes standard? How many terabytes of storage space are recommended? What VR interface options are available? When the next generation comes out, how easy will it be to upgrade? Is there a money-back guarantee?

My father left the business end to me. He was shopping based on looks, which, in fairness to him, is a not-insignificant part, it's just not the part I'm good at. That's why they had attractive and lissome sales associates to escort customers like my father around. My father was strolling arm-in-arm through the men's side of the showroom with a college-aged lightning bolt who, judging by the high-end monstrosities she kept pointing out to him, must have gotten a cut of the commissions. He, however, was drawn mostly to the symbols that were intricately carved into their facades: heraldic shields and lighthouses and doves and starry nights and sunny days and sailboats and military insignias and putters and caducei and gavels and fishing rods and terrible poetry celebrating fatherhood and Bible verses and crucifixes of every conceivable style.

They kept returning to a kelly-green monstrosity carved with Celtic knots, and every time they went back my father would say, "I'm part Irish, did you know that?"

If he had said it just once. Or twice. Or three times, or four. But the fifth time he said that, the sales associate replied, "No I didn't," which she had said every other time. But that fifth time she turned to me and asked from across the showroom, "Mr Otero, did you know your dad is part Irish?" The stupidity of the question really bothered me: I was his son! How could I not know? But then, of course, the fact was that I hadn't really known. I might have guessed as much from his last name and his sunburn-prone complexion, but that would have been only a guess. And so I lost it. "No, Mr Otero didn't know," I yelled at them from across the showroom, stunning the poor sales associate into silence. "Mr Otero's mom is Puerto Rican. Her whole side of the family is Puerto Rican. Mr Otero didn't even know he had a dad until a few months ago. And

Mr Otero sure as hell doesn't look Irish!"

My father unlatched his arm from the sales associate's arm and turned away from me, pretending to be suddenly interested in a monstrosity that depicted Abraham poised to sacrifice Isaac. The sales associate looked at me like I had just told her that I wanted to see other people.

I turned back to the manager, who held up a smile in front of his embarrassment. I reached into my jacket – I could feel my heart drumming through my shirt – and produced my wallet. "We'll take the Irish one," I said to him, sliding a credit card into his hand. "And give us the works. Top of the line."

"Splendid!" said the manager. And, just like that, everyone felt better: the manager, the sales associate, my dad, even me. Maybe money can't buy happiness, but it sure as hell can buy off unhappiness.

Travis wasn't straight, and he wasn't gay. He called himself 'stray'.

"I hate the term 'bisexual,'" he said to me the first time we drank coffee together in the hospital cafeteria. Upstairs, my father was having his first amputation: the left leg. I had just wished him luck, and left his room feeling like I didn't know who I was anymore. That's when I bumped into Travis, who took one look at my beleaguered

## Turning a person into a box that thinks it's a person has to be a little bit interesting

face and suggested coffee. And the best thing to do when you don't know yourself anymore is to get to know someone else.

That's how we got on his theory of sexuality. "Bisexual" is the most unsexual-sounding word I've ever heard. And anyway, it's not accurate. I'm not 'bisexual' every day. Some days I'm homo, some days I'm het, and some days I'm somewhere in between. Some days I'm nowhere at all. The term 'bisexual' is just shorthand for 'I don't know what the hell you are, so I'm just gonna call you bisexual and hope you don't hit on me.' I just wish people didn't get so hung up on labels. Every day of my life I'm a different person. My sexuality changes from moment to moment." He batted his eyelashes and concluded, "I like to 'stray'."

I pushed the sugar caddy toward him and answered, "So really, you're just fickle." I had known Travis a total of twenty minutes, and already I knew he was the sort of person who would take a joke like that the right way.

And embellish it: "And perverted. Oh, and very, very promiscuous. I'm bisexual, therefore I will fuck anything." He sucked a little coffee through his smile. "Good thing I work in a hospital, huh?"

"They can't cure everything. You be careful out there mister."

"What are you, my mother?"

"Hardly."

"Good. 'Cause I have an Oedipal complex. Big time."

I let out a big laugh, but Travis didn't join me for most of it. He was already on to the next thing – he was adding sugar to his coffee a pack at a time, stirring each one in slowly and getting ready to start a much less amusing conversation. "You and your dad. You're not very close, are you?"

"No. No we're not."

He looked at me. "Crappy childhood?"

"Nope. Pretty good childhood, all in all. He just wasn't a part of it."

"Ah. You met as adults?"

"Just a few months ago."



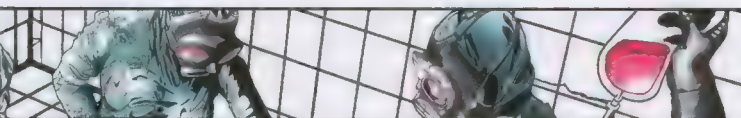
"Ah." He took a taste of coffee; he had added too much sugar and made a face. "And now, now he's dying, and so he's trying to make up for lost time?"

"To be honest, I don't really know what he's thinking. We don't talk that much. Or that freely."

"People," he said, shaking his head. "They'll break your heart every time. But you got to love something, right?"

"So they say."

"No. It's really true. It's the truest thing in life." He put his coffee aside and folded his hands on the table and looked only at them as he spoke. "Look Mr Otero, your dad's going to tell me stuff. Everyone who goes through this procedure – hell, anyone who's dying – they all tell me things. I'm going to see him several times a day almost every day, from now until he migrates, at every stage of this process. I'll be in the room when he is going through the worst of the pain, and he's going to grit his teeth and talk to me. I'll see him when he's so high on morphine that he'll think I'm you, and he will talk to me. I'm the one who will check on the stumps where his limbs have been severed. I'm going to stick a light in his eyes and a thermometer in his mouth and a stethoscope to his chest. That stethoscope is going to feel cold, but he'll feel the warmth of my hand surrounding it, and he's going to mistake that for intimacy.



For love. He won't be able to help it; everyone does. The natural, biological reaction when someone takes care of you is to feel loved. And so he's going to share a lot with me. Maybe everything."

It was my turn to try my coffee. Bitter. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need to know if you want me to tell you. Because my ears might be the last to hear the things you need to know about your father."

"Travis, wouldn't that violate a certain oath that you medical-types take? Doctor-patient confidentiality and all that?"

"Hey man, I'm no doctor! I'm just a lowly physician's assistant. And anyway, I wouldn't tell you anything until after he had migrated. Once that happens, I can tell you anything I want about him. The laws governing exvisibility are very clear – if you choose to become exvisible, then, by definition, you can't have any more secrets."

"But see, Travis, that's where I get confused. After the migration, I'm going to bring my dad home and put him on my desk and plug him into the wall-jack and connect my VR interface to him, and then I will proceed to read him like a goddamn book. And I'm pretty sure he's going to make for a very boring read. But whether or not it's entertaining, the fact is that I am going to have complete access to his mind. Complete. I mean, that's exactly what exvisibility is, right? It'll be like reading the source code of what makes my father tick. No more head games, no more hiding behind language, no more debating what the definition of 'is' is – just a perfectly transparent consciousness that is no longer capable of deception or camouflage. I'll get to know my father better than I ever could by talking to him, or by hearing stories about him: no disrespect to you. I mean, if that isn't what exvisibility is, then I've just wasted a lot of money on this procedure, haven't I?"

Travis was a good listener; he smiled and nodded and encouraged me to go on as I gave my little speech. But when I finished, he looked demurely at his thumbs again and asked, "So you think you'll just 'read' your dad and know the truth?"

"Isn't that how it works?"

"Kind of. But mostly no. See, Mr Otero, you're not going to get *the* truth, you're going to get *a* truth. His truth. His side of the story. You get the chance to walk a mile in your father's moccasins – which is pretty incredible, don't get me wrong. But it's not exactly truth. He's just exvisible; he's not omniscient. If we reduced God and made Him exvisible, well, then maybe you would get the truth. But with mere mortals, all you get is a point of view."

I answered Travis as if I had known him since college, as if he'd already heard me say so many stupid things while we'd been high together that what came next couldn't change our years-long friendship: "But if you don't believe in truth, Travis, if you just believe that life is just a series of competing points of view, and if you don't believe in God – because, my God, how could anyone believe in God anymore? – then exvisibility is the closest thing to truth you're going to get, right?"

"No. It's not. That's what I'm trying to tell you. It's a good start, but it's not the whole story."

"So you're saying that what you hear in hospital rooms, when people are out of their minds with pain and grief and fear, that's the truth then?"

"No. We never get the whole story, Mr Otero. But what you'll get is a different point of view. See, once he's reduced, his whole existence depends on just how narcissistic and self-centered he can be. The only way you can hold yourself together without a body is by being an unadulterated egomaniac. And so you'll be seeing his mind from the inside, true, but a mind modified to survive without a body to ground it. But see, right now, while he still has a body, he can afford to be self-critical. Self-deprecating. Humble. Repentant. And that's what I'm going to hear: all the regret and self-loathing and weakness and insecurity and pleas for forgiveness. That's what I can offer you. But only if you want them."

I leaned back in my chair; when I did, I was surprised to find I had tears perched on the edge of my eyelids, ready to leap like paratroopers out of my sockets. I ordered them to stand down before I continued. "You know what, Travis? I don't really want to hear him plead for forgiveness. I honestly, really could not care less. What I want...you're going to think I'm a terrible person for saying this."

"No I'm not."

I utterly believed him, but I might have continued even if I didn't. "What I really want is for *him* to know *my* story. I want to inject it into him like a vaccination or a disease, I don't know which. And for him to know. Finally. To know what he did, what it meant when he left me before I ever knew him, left me with only the specter of a vanished father to raise me, make me a man. How do I do that, Travis? How do I make myself exvisible to him?"

Travis gave me the most tender smile I've ever gotten from anyone who wasn't my mother or a lover. "We don't have the technology for that, Mr Otero. Science hasn't gotten that far. You'll have to do that the old fashioned way."

"And what way is that?"

"Talk to him."

The idea of reduction is fairly simple. Human adults may have as many as 500 trillion synaptic connections in their brains; a brainy three-year-old may have as many as a quadrillion. Given the fact that electronic circuits are more than a million times faster than neural connections, and that quantum circuits are exponentially faster than electronic ones, once we learned how to make quantum computers that safely exceeded a quadrillion calculations per second, we started thinking seriously about moving our minds out of our



bodies and into these hard drives. And once we had computers that performed 20 quadrillion calculations per second, it was inevitable that the early adapters would try. Those early adapters all died, but they paved the way for the rest of us to be immortal via migration.

Sort of. The fact is that neural circuits are neither electronic nor quantum circuits. A computer does not – yet! – create pathways based on what you experience or how you feel about that experience. You can have a circuit ready and waiting to receive an already-created connection, but that's a matter of transference, not generation. We don't know yet how we can use our computers to grow a mind, to allow migrated consciousnesses to expand and increase into the larger potential of their quantum circuitry. All we can do right now is move them and store them. Once they arrive, they become static, incapable of further development: in a way, neither alive nor dead.

They're working on it. There are at least a half-dozen new models in clinical trials right now that hold the promise of better allowing migrated minds to continue to grow post-migration. Eventually someone will get it right. And there are triple the amounts of money being invested in creating sustainable robotic bodies for the reduced. I'm sure that someday we'll be fully replicable, recoverable, both in mind and body, that we will all live in a Kurzweilian world of boundless spiritual machines. I did say Kurzweilian, right, and not Orwellian?

My father was taking well to his reduction lessons. He was a natural; it almost seemed as if he would be better off as a mind in a monstrosity than he'd ever been as a human. It took him less than a day – less than a day! – to gain command over his prosthetic leg, the one they attached after his first amputation. Dr Trebuchet was very excited; she told my father that progress like that was worthy of a medical journal. And that just set him off on a histrionic flight of ego from which I knew he would never recover: "You know how I did it?" he said to Dr Trebuchet and her retinue of sycophantic surgeons-in-waiting, who wrote down every word he said, in case he happened upon some insight indeed worthy of a medical journal, "I just took a deep breath and said to myself, 'Okay, Timmy-boy, no more fooling around. You've got to get in there and spread like the plague! Because if you don't, buddy-boy, then instead of that beautiful monstrosity your son bought you, it's just a vase full of ashes and sayonara!'" And he smiled and looked around and, when he didn't get the laugh he was expecting, repeated, "Like the goddamn bubonic plague!"

Whether or not it was funny, it worked for him. He spread like the plague through each new prosthetic limb – left leg, right leg, left arm, right arm, torso. The torso they connected in stages, organ by organ: they started, ceremoniously, by excising the cancerous pancreas; then they removed his bladder, colon, rectum, then up through the middle organs like the liver and kidneys left and right, pulling his small intestines out like a child gloriously unraveling a ball of yarn; and then, following the line up the gastrointestinal tract, they removed his esophagus, lung one and lung two, and then, on a day like any other, his heart. Each time, a humming spherical machine took the organ's place. They left the spine intact, feeding it into the neck hole of the somatium where it lay in a special sleeve, preserved in a green chemical bath – there it lay waiting to be destroyed along with the brain, should migration succeed.

At each stage, my father took to his new body with gusto, claimed each new Magic 8-Ball organ as his own. But he was even better at the VR exercises that would prepare him to live without any kind of body at all. He began, back when they hadn't yet removed any limbs, by wearing an inverted spaghetti-strainer of a hat on his head and moving a cursor on a screen with his thoughts. But monkeys

have been doing that for decades: in the next lesson, he was asked to turn the cursor into a blossoming flower with just the power of his mind. That leap, apparently, was one of the most difficult that migration patients had to make. Many people never learn to change the cursor into anything but a cursor; some people get so far as to change its color; some people may make a flower, but not a very realistic one, only one that looks blocky, pixilated, unreal and ultimately untenable for a sustained disembodied existence; some people make cars or ships or suns or cats or lovers or anything but what they were asked to, a simple flower. Some people, frustrated, defeated, explode the cursor in the attempt. They are dismissed from the program immediately.

Dad made a bouquet of roses for Dr Trebuchet. When he did, the whole room gasped appreciatively, and Dr Trebuchet turned to me and asked, "Well, Mr Otero, why haven't you gotten me flowers yet?" which was good for a laugh from those toadies. Pro forma, she asked my father to follow the instructions and make a single flower – which he did with ease – but everyone knew after that little show that Mr Timothy Fagin was going to be a star student. And he lived up to every expectation: he could create a *tromp l'oeil* likeness of himself on screen, or exaggerate the features on a whim, and there were plenty of tummy-tucking and pec-inflating and penis-

## He spent months learning how to shrink or grow his likeness, or teleport it around the screen

enlargement jokes to go around. He spent months learning how to shrink or grow his likeness, or teleport it around the screen, or even duplicate himself, two, three, ten, fifty, an infinite regression of onscreen fathers. That was my least favorite exercise.

And he also learned how to alter the program itself, so that his entire existence became subject to his whims. Any period in history, or any blend of history, or any place he could imagine, possible or not in a world governed by physics and time, he could now create, inhabit, master. All things considered, this was a much better deal for my father than your typical hereafter could ever be. To get into heaven, after all, you have to be a good. Or at least confess your sins.

I was trying to sound nasty to cover up other things, but Travis saw right through me. He gave my knee an ironic squeeze and, with a gentle, almost oneiric voice, said, "It's not like you ever loved him."

We looked at each other. Then I humphed. And said, "True. But what kills me is I never really got a chance to hate him."

We both laughed a little at that. And then, on the heels of that merry-go-sorry joke, Travis, looking to change the subject and lighten the mood, perked up and said, "I think Dr Trebuchet likes you."

"I like her too," I said charily. "She's a very good doctor."

"No. I mean she *likes* you."

"Oh grow up."

"I'm serious! I've seen the way her eyes linger over you, how she's always pressing her card into your hand. You must have fifty of her business cards by now."

"She's just being professional. And in her line of work, being a nice, approachable person comes with the job."

The look of consternation on Travis's face reminded me of a braying donkey: all teeth and insult. "Are you insane? Have you ever even met a doctor? They're jerks! They're scientists! They don't give a shit about you as a person. You're like a side of beef to them. Un-



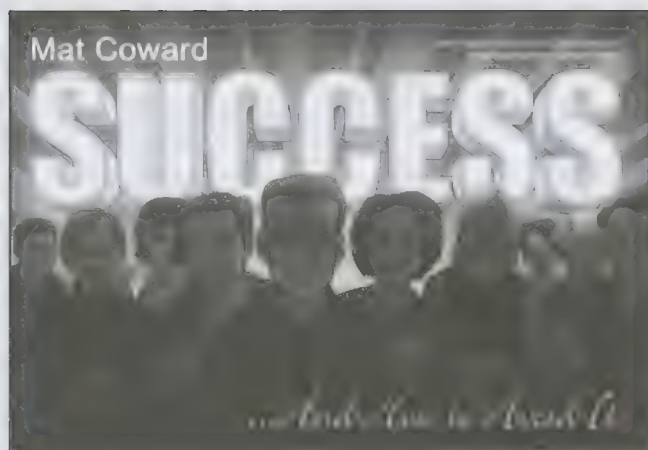
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less they like you."

"Sorry Travis, but you're way off on this one. She's just going through the motions: asking me how I am, how I'm holding up during this very difficult time – hell, she even offered to give me a free physical once all this was over."

Travis's jaw dropped like a sabotaged elevator. "You are the stupidest man I've ever met in my entire life. Really. The absolute stupidest. *She is a surgeon!* She is one of the premiere experts on consciousness migration in the entire world. *She does not give physicals!* My God man. Do you need her to do a pole-dance or something before you ask her out?"

"That'd be nice. Got a stripper pole around here somewhere?"

"Yes. In the doctors' lounge. They all strip for each other between saving peoples' lives."

We both laughed. When we were done laughing, we fell silent for a few moments before I asked, "So you think she really likes me?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Is she available?"

"She's *always* available. She's more stray than I am."

I just shook my head and smiled. "What do you think, Travis? Wouldn't it be better if everyone was exvisible? No more lies, no more head-games, no more loves lost or misunderstood fathers.



We'd all just know the truth. Act on true information. Maybe everyone should go get reduced, right now."

Travis patted my back. "Yeah, that'd be nice. But people wouldn't go for it. People like to be invisible."

"There'd be less wars if we were all exvisible."

"Hmm. I don't know. There might be more."

"Well, at least they'd be fought for the right reasons."

"Now you're just reaching."

"No I'm not! Think about it. What would be lost if we just knew everything about what everyone was thinking and feeling?"

Travis surprised me with the seriousness of his response. "Mystery."

I didn't miss a beat: "Mystery is overrated."

"So is truth."

We laughed again. "Yeah, I think I'm coming to believe that. But if both mystery and truth are overrated, what's left to us?"

Travis was just about to answer with some no doubt witty rejoinder when I saw his eyes catch sight of something. I followed them to a phalanx of lab coats heading toward us. Leading them was Dr Trebuchet; in her hands, she held the kelly-green, Celtic-knotted monstrosity my father had chosen as his final resting place. She held it aloft like Galahad marching into Camelot, bearing the Holy Grail for his king.

Travis and I both stood. The phalanx stopped before us, and, after a few seconds of ceremonious silence, Dr Trebuchet, beaming, beautiful, and suddenly on my sexual radar, said, "Mr Otero, the migration was a complete success. It is my great honor to present to you the new Mr Timothy Fagin."

I did not refuse to take it from her. I did not smash it on the ground. I did not chuck it in the Hudson or shatter it with a hammer or take a chainsaw to it or just refuse to plug it in and let the back-up battery expire. I truly did not want to love this man, but this time it didn't matter what I wanted. I took my father home and, little by little, I got to know him. ✨



"I cannot define for you what God is," Jung wrote to me just before he died. "I can only say that my work has proved empirically that the pattern of God exists in every man, and that this pattern has at its disposal the greatest of all his energies for transformation and transfiguration of his natural being. Not only the meaning of his life but his renewal and his inviolations depend on his conscious relationship with this pattern in his collective unconscious."

*Jung and the Story of Our Time*

Laurens van der Post

Paul Meloy's *Islington Crocodiles*

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# Deer Flight

**ALIETTE de BODARD**

ILLUSTRATED by STEFAN OLSEN



For fifteen years after his wife found her doe-skin under the floorboards and ran away, Lesper waited for her to come back. He would go from pool to pool in the dark places of the forest, and watch the deer herds gather, hoping one of them would turn human. Hoping it would be her, smiling at him, telling him she had been wrong to return to the forest. He knew it was foolishness, but still he waited.

On the third day of the fifteenth year, he found a lone doe-girl in human shape near the edge of the forest, slumped against a tree. She was breathing hard, and her discarded doe-skin lay at her feet.

She was not Tarra. For a while he did not know what to say. He had hoped, so much, that it might be his wife, but the girl before him was far younger. And so different.

She raised her eyes, and saw him. Huge almond eyes bored into him as if searching his soul. She was utterly naked; her human skin was brown, gleaming with russet reflections, and he knew it would be soft and pliant under his fingers, knew she would smell musky, of the herd, and of the earth with its mantle of fallen leaves.

"Lesper," she said. "Sanctuary – I claim sanctuary."

"From whom?" he asked, still trying to recover from the shock of seeing one of her kind.

Her mouth stretched in a bitter smile. "Hunters. I have shaken them off, for now." She focused on him for the first time. "I am sorry for your loss."

He started to say he had not lost anything, and then it occurred to him she had known his name, and where his house was. "What do you mean?" he asked. But her head had fallen back against the trunk, and her chest barely moved.

He carried her to his house, through the last trees of the forest. Her doe-skin lay on his shoulder, tingling with magic. She weighed little, a thing of dappled light and endless afternoons by the pool. The horn bracelets on her arms were cold at first, and then warmed against his skin. Her legs were crisscrossed with red weals. Running through brambles, he guessed, and wondered how long they had before the hunters, whoever they were, caught up with them.

No use worrying. His wife had fled, and years at the edge of the forest had dulled his magic. Lesper was as defenceless as the girl he had in his arms, a greying wizard with little magic of his own, and no knowledge of weapons.

Once in his house, he laid her on the bed, her doe-skin by her side. Then he rummaged through the chests, and found his old book of magic. He opened it to a healing spell, stared at the faded, alien words on the page. They tasted sour in his mouth as he pronounced them: it took him three tries before he managed to get the spell to work.

*Some wizard*, he thought, wryly amused, watching the lacerations on the legs knit together. Wustan, his former liege, would have laughed at such a feeble healing. He felt light-headed, as if his own veins were open, pouring blood on the floor. A healing always took its toll out of the wizard's strength, but his unfamiliarity with the spell meant it was much worse than usual.

He reached, shakily, for a chair, pulled it near the bed, and waited.

After a while she opened her eyes. He saw her tense at the unfamiliarity of the surroundings. Her whole body straightened as if she wanted to wrap the doe-skin around her, shape-change into a doe, and leap back into the forest.

"Lesper," she said, at last, sinking back against the pillow.

"You are safe," he said. "For now."

She nodded. "My name is Naraya. I owe you –"

"Nothing," he said. "Just tell me who they are, and why they hunt you. And why you should share my loss."

Her eyes grew distant, as if she were remembering the depths of the forest, and the herd she had left behind. "They came upon us at dawn. Near the pool where we take off our skins and bathe. We scattered – we thought if we went far enough into the forest we would lose them. I ran – it hurt so much, my legs were burning, I could not think of anything else but escape. I –" The eyes focused on him again. "Lesper, I'm sorry. They killed Tarra."

Her grief, her weariness, were audible. "Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't have answers. I only saw hounds, and horse-men, coming into our secret place as if all the wards meant nothing to them."

"And Tarra?"

Her face froze, as if she were seeking words of comfort. "Tarra – Tarra wanted to come back to you. She had told us; we knew it would be one of her last baths with us. Gods," she said, closing her eyes, "how she laughed as she discarded her skin and took her human shape. I – They shot an arrow, and it hit her in the back."

He thought of Tarra, of her hair, carelessly tossed back as she stood before the pool. Of her gone, and fifteen years of waiting reduced to ashes.

"I have to see her."

"Don't be a fool," Naraya said. "They knew where the pool was. If you go there they will find you."

"I need to see her," he repeated.

"You did love her," Naraya said at last. "For all that you stole her skin in the first place."

*I stole her skin as she bathed by that pool because I saw her, and knew she had to be mine. I realised that if I could prevent her from changing shapes she would not run away. And later I fell in love. He knew Naraya would not understand.*

"It changes nothing," Naraya said. "It is folly, to go back to that place."

"You do not know who hunts you."

Her eyes were wary, those of a doe before it bolts. "No."

"They have found your secret place. They have followed you through the breadth of the wood. What makes you think you are safe here?"

"You are a wizard," she said, with such hunger in her voice that he felt ashamed of what he had sunk to.

"I am poor protection against your hunters, especially if I do not know what spells they use, and where they come from. They may have left something by the pool. And," he said, "I was told that the place could not be found twice in the same way." *I could not find it. I was lost for fifteen years in the forest, listening to its voice, but hearing nothing.*

"They may know all the ways." Naraya did not speak for a while, watched him, with what seemed like pity to him. "For your healing, then. And we will not tarry there."

"No. You should rest now," he added.

"We are both tired."

Yes, *we are*. But he did not move. He watched her until the huge eyes closed, and she breathed evenly, abandoning herself to sleep.

The horn bracelets on her wrists caught the light. On impulse, he reached out, touched them. They tingled with magic. Like everything of hers, most likely; like her tunic, like the doe-skin on the bed. He laid his hand on the skin, let its magic rise in him, speaking of another time, a time when he had walked through the forest, losing himself in its song, and had seen otherworldly women bathing in a pool that should not have been there.

He slept on the floor near the hearth that night, and dreamt of deer running through the forest, russet shadows soon swallowed



by the trees. And the hunters came, casting their darkness over his little world; the hunters came, bearing bows and barbed arrows, and they laughed at his pain.

He gave Naraya some of his wife's clothes, and blinked back tears when he saw her: her hair held in place by his wife's horn hairpins, the russet, delicate oval of her face. She moved within the house with hunger in her eyes, encompassing everything new to her, devouring human things with her gaze.

"I have dreamt my whole life of entering one of your dwellings," she said, when he grew curious.

Her existence was the forest and the herd and the pool; was it any wonder that just as Lesper dreamt of losing himself under the trees, she too dreamt of something beyond her reach?

Naraya wrapped her doe-skin around her shoulders, tied the ends so it would not fall. "Shall we go?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice.

Once within the forest she did not speak, but bounded ahead, mingling with the trees. He could taste her fear. What did he think he was doing? It was sheer foolishness to go back there.

No. He had to see Tarra.

Within the forest, the light never changed, as if the sun outside had no power under the canopy. It seemed to him that no time at all had passed when Naraya stopped. Ahead of them, trees grew sparser, changed in some indefinable way to become old and vast and terrible.

"Here," Naraya said. She did not need to; this was what he had been seeking, all his life. The need to see Tarra was greater now, constricting his chest, shortening his breath. He had to run forward.

He checked himself, with difficulty. Tarra was dead. Nothing he said or did would bring her back. Cautiously, he focused on his surroundings. The forest sang its endless, familiar tune, but here it sounded stronger. The air smelled of stale magic, with a tantalising hint of the familiar, one that eluded him the more he sought it.

Naraya was kneeling by a tree, looking at the ground. "Their tracks are a day old. The wards have drawn themselves together again."

"Is it safe?" he asked.

She shrugged. "As much as it can be."

They went forward, slowly. Naraya was looking everywhere around her, as if horsemen might burst out from one of the trees. Her lips were pressed against each other, so hard they showed white against her russet skin.

He felt a resistance as they passed the edge of the wood, but it quickly vanished, leaving them standing, alone, in a place where light fell in swathes, like a shining veil over the blades of grass and the surface of the water.

Less disoriented than Lesper, Naraya had run forward, and was kneeling by the lakeside. He followed her, his head still spinning at the wonder of it all, still tracking that elusive scent in the spells of the invaders.

Tarra lay on her side in the dewy grass, bathed in light. She was in human shape. For a moment he allowed himself to think she was sleeping, but then Naraya moved aside, and he saw the arrow between Tarra's shoulder blades.

The world spun and spun and went darker. A wordless cry escaped him; he knelt by her side, touching the cold, moist flesh, the dull hair.

"I am sorry," Naraya said, behind him, her voice toneless. "She chose the wrong moment."

He could not speak. There were no words to encompass the depth of his grief. His wife was dead and everything he had held to

for fifteen years had irremediably shattered.

Slowly, Lesper worked the arrow loose, raised it to the light. The shaft was black, and the tail feathers bore no distinctive patterns. It throbbed with magic: it had to, to bring one of the deer-people down.

Magic. Hunters. Yes, he knew the patterns of the spell in the air, knew them because they were his own, expanded upon to break the entrance barrier. His own.

"Areskia," he said.

"What does it mean?" Naraya asked.

A thousand words rose in his mind, clamouring to be released. "It means you are in danger."

"Why?"

"She knows all there is to know about the forest and your kind. However far you run, she will find you."

"I don't understand."

"I taught her," Lesper said. "A long time ago." He remembered her, twenty years ago: a cocky girl Lord Wustan had chosen as Lesper's apprentice, eager to learn, eager to mock. And she had learnt, all too well. When Lesper had turned his back on the court and chosen the forest, Areskia had replaced him. As far as he knew, she still was Wustan's wizard. Why should she want to hunt the deer-people? Why would she kill?

It made no sense, he thought, kneeling by the side of his wife, dead for no reason he could discern. No sense at all. Gently, he closed Tarra's eyes, brushed her hair, as he had used to do, when they lay together in bed. *Forgive me. I was not there when you needed me.*

He did not know, afterwards, how they managed the long journey back. Tarra's body lay heavily in his arms, her doe-skin on her shoulder. He had stabbed the arrow into it, to carry it better, and now it seemed to drag him down with each step he took.

Naraya walked by his side, silent, her head lifted to scent the wind. He longed, more than ever, to lose himself in the magic of the forest, to find a place where there was no grief, no tears. Areskia, he thought. *Is this how you repay me for my teachings?*

Her hunters had scattered the deer-people, had hunted Naraya through the woods. To kill her, as they had killed Tarra? But why would they want to kill the deer-people? Why would they leave Tarra's body by the pool? He did not know. But they had been after Naraya, and the one thing he did know was that Areskia was not one to let her prize escape. Or Wustan, for that matter, although the man he remembered, easygoing and blunt-spoken, would never have understood what power lay in the forest.

He would bury Tarra, give her that at least. And then he and Naraya would have to leave his house, which was too close to the castle and the city it protected. They would have to move to some other place, away from Wustan's power, away from Areskia's sight. If there were such places in the world.

What did Areskia want of the deer-people?

They were within yards of his house when Naraya stopped. "What is it?" he asked.

She shook herself, turned to him a face twisted by fear. "They are here," she said. "Run."

And then the world burst apart.





From behind the thick foliage, he caught glimpses of colours, heard horses' hooves, clinks of metal, harsh words barked by familiar voices. Before he could think clearly, he turned, and ran after Naraya.

She was already far in front of him, a blur of movement among the trees. He followed, still holding Tarra, his heart threatening to burst out of his chest, a sour taste of fear filling his mouth. Already he was no longer a wizard or a human, but something far more primordial, something that ran and hid in the shadows because it was defenceless, something doomed by the hunt.

Running, running with the sound of the hunters' hooves behind them. Faceless, voiceless, the horses galloped after both of them, getting closer and closer. His grip on Tarra loosened; he could not think of anything but the hunt at his heels.

"Where?" he asked, his breath burning in his throat. "Where do we go?"

She was ahead of him, bounding on legs that did not seem to work the human way. She turned back, liquid eyes alight with terror, and shouted, "The pool, inside the woods! They won't be able to –"

The rest of her voice was lost to him. His chest ached; he was an old man, with none of her grace, none of the agility that never seemed to leave the deer-people.

"I can't," he said, struggling to remember a word, a spell. The forest seemed to have taken everything from him. His hands, deadened, finally lost their hold on his wife's body, and for a moment he stopped running and stood unmoving over the corpse he had gone so far to claim.

He heard her scream. She reached out, threw something white

**He felt her doe-skin unfold, wrap itself around her, felt the forest magic rise**

towards him. He extended his hands to receive it, but it went wide.

"Don't touch it," she shouted. "Run, Lesper, it's all that matters."

He had time to see, at his feet, one of the horn pins that had held her hair. And then she was near him, lifting him, pressing something into the palm of his hand. "Hold on," she said, and the sounds of hooves echoed all around them.

There was a noise, like hundreds of twigs breaking. He turned, and saw that where the pin had lain was now a vast expanse of thorns.

He felt her doe-skin unfold, wrap itself around her, felt the forest magic rise. He was holding on to her, and she had become something else now, her neck elongating, and she was holding him not with hands, lengthening under him, changing.

Run, she said, in his head, and the doe beneath him leapt forward, into the shadows.

But... he said, thinking of the thorns.

*They're not real, she said. I made them using the power in the horn, but I can't shape more than illusions. As soon as they realise this the thorns will vanish. It's a matter of seeing what's true and what's not.*

He could still hear the hunt, the hounds baying. The air was thick with magic; patterns he had once known by heart, the mastery of which remained just beyond his reach.

He turned, and saw the horsemen behind them. The thorns had vanished. *They're gaining on us*, he said. He could barely hang on to her: he was tossed from side to side as she ran.

Throw the bracelets, she answered.

They were in his hand: she had given them to him as she picked him up.

Throw them.

He raised his hand, threw them as far as he could; watched their glittering arc. As they touched the earth light blinded him, and when he looked again, twin lakes extended as far as his eyes could see.

Another illusion? he asked.

Yes, she said. *I am the youngest of my kind, Lesper, I can't cast more than this. And we have no horn left now.*

The lakes did not stop the hunters for long, either; soon he heard again the hooves behind them. The doe under him was breathing hard; he could feel her weariness, and knew it would not be long before she collapsed.

Naraya. He wanted to tell her to abandon him; without his weight she might run fast enough to elude them.

The words never got past his lips.

Something rose under the hooves of the doe, something unexpected. Her front legs collapsed, throwing him towards the ground.

He landed on a carpet of dead leaves that failed to soften his fall. His head ached, and one of his legs felt broken.

"Naraya," he said.

She was struggling to free herself from the branch that had snared her legs; the eyes she raised to him were filled with tears.

Gently, gritting his teeth against the pain in his legs, he tried to lift the branch. His arms failed him. "I'm sorry," he said. He stood over her, shaking as if with fever, as a dozen horsemen formed a circle around them.

"Leave her alone," he said, as the world spun and spun around him.

The hunters laughed. He knew what they saw: an old, greying man, barely able to stand.

"Leave her," he said, in a shaking voice.

The circle opened, to admit a white rider on a white horse, with clothes so bright they hurt Lesper's eyes.

"She is mine," the rider said, and then her eyes focused on Lesper.

"Areskia," Lesper said. He did not have the energy to bow.

"Lesper? What are you doing here?" She had not changed: the drawling voice was still the same; her face, with its harsh lines and aquiline nose, was still that of the girl who had eagerly learnt every one of his spells.

*What I have to do.* "Leave her be," he said. He struggled to find other words. "She is innocent."

Areskia laughed, bitterly. "I should hope so. Otherwise my time has been wasted."

"I –" Her radiance hurt his eyes; he struggled to focus his mind on something, anything that would reach her. He was so weary the trees and the riders had started to merge with one another. "Leave her," he said.

"And if I do not? What spell do you plan on revealing?" Her voice was sad. "You are a wreck, Lesper. Fifteen years in the forest, looking for your wife, and even human words have deserted you. You couldn't even recite a simple spell without collapsing."

*I made my own choices.* Words fled, as if Tarra's death had scattered his being to the corners of the world. He could no longer focus on anything.

He heard Areskia say to the riders, "Take her. Alive."

No. No. *You killed Tarra*, he thought, and then the world spun and spun, and darkness came to swallow him whole. The last thing he heard was Naraya's screams.

.....  
Sometime later, Lesper woke, so weak he could barely move. He was alone; Naraya had disappeared. Areskia had won.

Why? he thought, and had no answer. For a long while he lay on his back, staring at the canopy of trees overhead. Tarra was dead;



Naraya had been captured. He had failed both of them.

*You are a wreck, Lesper.*

He was.

The forest made no comment. It spoke with its usual voice, in the rustle of leaves in the trees, and in the birdsong above him. It did not judge. It could not judge.

He had failed both Tarra and Naraya.

When he could move again, he rose, wincing at the pain. He felt so weak he thought he would collapse again.

Slowly he made his way back, leaning on a branch he had picked up. He recovered the bracelets and the hairpins. They had resumed their normal shape; Naraya's illusions were no more. He held them in his hand, breathing in the forest magic that was as alien to him as the human spells he had once mastered.

Tarra's body was still where he had dropped it, the arrow still embedded in her doe-skin. He knelt, slowly, picked her up. Her weight was tangible, almost reassuring. That at least he had not lost.

He carried her all the way, clinging to her even though his arms ached and his hands threatened to drop their burden.

Back in his house, Lesper paused to eat some bread. He then found a shovel, and slowly dug a grave for his wife at the back of the garden.

*Tarra.*

*I am sorry.*

After he had covered both her and her doe-skin with earth, he stood back, and looked at the brown patch of earth at his feet, with the black arrow driven point first into the ground, to serve as a marker: all that was left of fifteen years. He would have wept, but he no longer knew how.

He knelt by the grave instead, and prayed to a god he had never really believed in. He prayed that she would find safe passage into heaven, and ascend into the light with no memory of the hunt.

Night fell, covered him with its cool mantle. He did not move, feeling the forest around him come awake with starlight, with the voices of owls and great cats on the prowl.

Naraya was gone. He felt the warmth of the hairpin and of the bracelets in his hands.

*You are a wreck, Lesper.*

What could he do? Any spell would sap the strength out of him. Areskia was right: fifteen years spent at the edge of the forest had slowly drained his power, leaving him with nothing of the magic he had once wielded. Nothing.

The bracelets tingled under his touch. He remembered no human spell. But in fifteen years he had had time to see another kind of magic.

The forest was silent now, watching him.

"Help me," he said aloud. "Naraya was yours. She is still yours."

There was no answer. But the horn in his hands was warm, exuding magic.

*Help me.*

He felt the magic rise, felt himself open to the power pouring out of the objects in his hands, even as they were reduced to dust. The magic wrapped itself around him, shaped him as it would. It was wild, and old beyond belief, and it felt his need as no one else could. Naraya had not been able to see its full potential.

*Help me,* he said, and then all human words were burnt out of him. Power coursed through his veins like sap, rustled in his hair, extended wings like giant leaves. His mind widened, touched the forest. He was the trees growing slowly towards light they could not reach, the bucks fighting each other for the does, the roots burrowing deep under the earth in their endless quest for water.

He rose, scarcely aware he had done so. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a wordless roar came out of him, scattering owls from their perches.

He saw in his thoughts a building made of stone, with towers like branches and walls with deep-seated roots. *There.*

Under the light of the stars he walked towards the castle. The earth was smooth under his feet, and the trees whispered to him in words of wind, words that encompassed every question he had asked himself for fifteen years, words that went beyond the meagre spells he had once known.

He reached the road, which lay deserted at this hour of the night. Had there been robbers he could have scattered them with a word.

No one was there to stop him in the streets of the city either. Only one building was lit, and the sounds of revelry floated to him, meaningless.

Before the castle gates two guards watched him come, and raised their spears to block his way.

*Let me pass,* he wanted to say. *I have come, and you may not stop me.*

They would not have understood.

He raised a hand instead, and vines rose along the shafts of the spears, extending tendrils towards the guards, until they were bound as securely as prey in a spider's web. He walked past them then, towards the gates. They sprouted leaves at his touch, remembering spring in the forest and the deep longing to put forth flowers. He had only to push, and the gates opened.

More guards ran towards him. He bound them with a flick of his hand. He could feel, like a faraway heartbeat, the presence of the one he had come to rescue, and it was in that direction that he went.

*I am coming.*

At last he reached a room with thick, oaken doors. His hand extended towards the panels, but they opened without his touch.

A woman dressed in white, with a harsh face, stood watching him warily. She had just shaken off the last of the vines twining on her dress. Behind her, not so lucky, two guards had been bound.

"Begone," she said, and the taste of her spell filled the air.

*You may not touch me,* he thought. *You have no hold over what I am.*

She heard nothing, but something made her pause, look at him. "Lesper? What have you done?"

*Give her to me. Give her to me and I'll leave.*

She shook her head. Reached out, slowly, with a pale hand, and touched his chest. Cold spread through him, burning his limbs, his mind.

"What have you done?" the woman asked, and he heard the panic in her voice.

*What needed to be done.*

Magic throbbed in the air around him, but did not touch him. He shook her off, and moved past her, into the room.

The deer-girl, in human shape, was lying on a bed at the farthest end, her face pale, her eyes closed. A thin red line marked her right wrist. He moved closer, a sense of exultation rising through him, the magic receding as he neared his goal.

And saw the second bed.

An old man lay upon it, his face the colour of winter snow, with





a bluish tinge. A poultice covered his chest. The sound of his laboured breathing filled the room, made Lesper ill at ease, as if any gesture might sever the thin thread of the old man's life. He knew the face, as well as his own.

Wustan. His liege, long ago.

The forest magic rushed out of him as he knelt before the bed, years of obedience having ingrained the gesture in his mind. "My lord," he said, in a hoarse voice that felt as though it had not been used in years. There was no answer.

"He has been that way for four days," Areskia said, behind him.

"How?" he asked.

Areskia moved so that she stood between him and the bed. "I would have thought news would reach you, Lesper, even in that forsaken house where you live." She was not smiling. "He rode to the hunt five days ago, chasing a boar. His guards lost him, and we combed the forest the whole night without finding anything. When we found him in the morning, he was as you see him."

Lesper did not know why he felt such guilt, as if he had been the one who had failed Wustan. "Couldn't you heal him?"

"A healing takes of the wizard's strength to help the body repair itself. He is so near death that any attempt would drain the wizard dry before he had any chance to begin his recovery." She sounded weary, as if she no longer believed in anything. Four days of keeping watch by his bed. Four days of wondering when the last spark would falter and fail.

No.

"You hunted," he said. And remembered, from his former lifetime, a healing spell that did not tax the wizard's strength. "For an

**A woman dressed in white, with a harsh face, stood watching him warily**

innocent."

"You see it at last," Areskia said. "A bowl of an innocent's blood will lend enough strength to snatch a man from Death's claws."

He turned, to look at Naraya, at the thin slit, already healed, on her wrist. The youngest of her kind, she had said. Of those who did not know human flaws.

"There were others you could have found," he said.

Areskia's face was grim. "Yes," she said. "Babes. That much blood would have killed them. I balk at this kind of cruelty, Lesper. My oath was of fealty to Lord Wustan, but there are limits."

He looked at Wustan: faint colour had returned to the old man's cheeks, and there might have been a slight, very slight rise in his breath.

"He is better now than he used to be," Areskia said. "All I can do is wait. I had not expected a miracle in any case."

"There was no need to kill Tarra," he said.

"Tarra?" Her face was blank.

"My wife."

"I did not kill her," Areskia said.

"Someone shot her."

Her face darkened. "I gave strict orders to the contrary, and they were obeyed as far as I know."

"On your word?"

"On my word as a wizard and vassal," she snapped. "But I don't claim to control every man's gestures. If you find who did this, you have my leave to repay them in kind."

He wanted so much to believe her guilty. Because if he did not, he had to face the knowledge that Tarra's murderer would never be

found. That he would never have his revenge. But a wizard's word was not given lightly.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Wait," Areskia said, spreading her hands, helplessly. "He should mend."

She loved him. It was an odd thing to say of a wizard for her liege, but he heard it in her voice. It was more than duty that had kept her by Wustan's bed, wondering when he would die. Lesper should have been glad. She had hunted him through the wood until he collapsed, had scattered the deer-people. And now she was paying, she was experiencing grief, worry. Part of him revelled in her despair, but another, deeper part whispered that he should know what love could do. That he should forgive. He did not want to. He wanted her to suffer as he had.

He could not hate her. He understood her, all too well.

At length Areskia turned away from the bed. "You can take her." She gestured, and the vines binding the guards fell away. With the forest magic gone, Lesper no longer knew how to prevent her from undoing his spell, so he let her do. "The guards will escort you out. I have no further need for her. She should recover quickly; she is young, after all." As Wustan was not.

"I thought -"

"That I would fight you?" She shook her head. "No. Leave me be, Lesper."

He moved, took hold of Naraya. Areskia was sitting by the head of the bed, watching Wustan intently, her face twisted by anxiety.

"Thank you," he said.

She did not answer at first. "Be careful, Lesper. The forest is a treacherous mistress, and one day you'll pay the price for using its power so liberally."

He said nothing. He merely walked away, followed by the two guards. The last image he had of her was of a woman in white, watching silently over her Lord, and it hurt him like a knife twisted in his heart.

Naraya woke soon after he brought her home. She bore no other marks than the slit on her wrist, and thanked him profusely for coming to her rescue. He felt a fraud. She had never been in danger. The well of grief within him would not close: he would have to go back to the castle and wring the truth out of those who had hunted Naraya and the deer-people. He needed to know who had killed Tarra.

Naraya, oblivious to his musings, had rummaged in the cupboard for herbs, and was brewing him a tea. She sounded perfectly happy, as if nothing had ever happened, and was singing to herself, words he could not understand.

At length, unable to bear her company, a mute reminder of his dead wife, he went into the garden, and sat by Tarra's grave. The arrow that marked it still quivered with magic; he reached out, on impulse, and took it. Magic throbbed within the palm of his hand.

Magic. Areskia had to have given those arrows to the soldiers. Had to have seen the need for bringing a deer-woman down. She had lied to him. He was rising to go back to the castle, and then something else occurred to him.

The magic in the arrow was familiar. All too familiar. It had consumed him, drained him of everything but grief. Forest magic. Areskia would not have known how to draw on it.

He felt the tingle of magic from the arrow, let it fill him. He remembered Naraya's words: *it's a matter of seeing what's true and what's not.*

What was true and was not. What was...



The arrow wavered between his fingers, changed into something else. His grip shifted, and it bit into his skin, drawing blood: a dagger made of horn, with images of the deer-people engraved on the hilt. He remembered how, when they first had come near the pool, Naraya had knelt by Tarra's side, obscuring her for a brief moment while she drew on the power within the horn. To hide the dagger in Tarra's corpse.

When he raised his eyes, Naraya was watching him. "So you've found out," she said.

"You killed her," he said, showing her the dagger. Her dagger.

She laughed. There was no innocence in that laughter, but a bitterness that cut him to the core. The deer-people were not meant to laugh like that.

"Why?" he asked.

She shook her head. "She did not love you, Lesper. She never loved you. You deserved so much better than her."

"She wanted to come back to me."

"Yes," Naraya said. "You are blind, Lesper. She came to you because you took her skin, and she ran back into the forest because she was young, and thought summer would last forever. She thought the herd would always be there for her, and that the winter of her life was a far away dream. When she could no longer run with us, she wanted to come back. It was unfair."

"Unfair?"

"She had someone to come back to," Naraya said. Her voice broke. "Do you have any idea of what life in the forest is really like, Lesper? Not knowing from one year to the next whether the food will still be there? Growing old, and year after year wondering if the herd will still want you? If the wolves will not finally outrun you?"

Her voice was harsh. "Why should she have everything I wanted, and throw it away?"

"You killed her."

"Yes."

He wondered what he would have done, when he first found her and learnt she had killed Tarra.

"You're a good man, Lesper," Naraya said.

He rose, holding the dagger, the horn dagger she had plunged in Tarra's back. "Yes," he said. "And blind as well."

She held herself straight, bitterly proud. "And what will you do? Kill me?"

He wanted to. He ached so much with grief, with the need to do something, anything to take his mind off his sorrow. It would be easy, to stab her. She would fight, but she was still unschooled in the magic of her kind, and he could draw on the dagger's power if need be. He imagined the dagger plunging in her chest, the blood spreading across her skin in a rising tide.

"No," he said, letting the dagger fall to the ground. "I will not stain that blade with your blood. You are not worthy of that mercy." The herd would reject her for what she had done, and she had no place in the human world, no matter how dearly she had wanted to be part of it. And killing her would not end his grief. Nothing would. "Go," he said.

Her face was unreadable. She turned, slowly, as stately as a queen. "Good-bye, Lesper," she said.

He watched her walk away from him. At the end of the clearing she turned, and said, "My skin is yours. I have no further need of it, and you should be able to put it to better use than me." And then she was gone. Forever. He fell to his knees, and wept.

Tarra. He would never know whether Naraya had been lying about his wife. He was not sure he cared any more: Tarra was dead, and he had loved her. It seemed to be the only thing that mattered.

Inside the house, Naraya's skin lay on the bed, shimmering with a hundred colours to his eye. It promised power. He took it, and felt the voice of the forest rise in him. *Come.*

There would be deer-people in the woods, who still remembered Tarra. Who could tell him something of what she had been, of her life during those fifteen years.

He stood, holding the skin. Fifteen years of waiting for her, and the waiting was over.

*You are blind, Lesper.* Despite everything, he could not bring himself to hate Naraya. She had so much wanted to be human, and it had distorted everything for her.

Blind. Areskia had been wrong as well, to think her innocent. Not everything in the forest was innocent, just as not all men were tainted. If there ever was a fool, it was he, he who had believed good of Naraya. He who could forgive a murderer, and walk away from hunters without a thought of revenge.

The skin rippled under his touch, filling him with strength, promising the endless cycle of seasons, springs running with the males, autumns of fleeting love, winters with the rest of the herd drawn around him, protecting him from the world he had left.

Slowly, he laid it on his shoulders. Power settled on him like a mantle.

*One last thing, he thought. One last debt to pay.*

Areskia was still sitting by the bed when he came. Wustan's face was still pale; his breath still came in shallow gasps.

"Lesper?" she asked, and then she saw his face. "No. You cannot –"

"She did not have the power to heal him," he said. "But I have. I have paid the price." He held out his wrist to her. "Take what you need."

He did not feel the cut, nor the loss of blood. Sap rose to fill his veins, and the forest was still singing to him. His skin parted like leaves for the knife, and closed around the wound.

"Goodbye," he said, longing already for the comfort of his kin. He no longer knew anything save the desire to lose himself under the canopy.

He turned, never seeing colour return to Wustan's face, or Areskia's last, desperate look at him. He had made his choice.

And the forest sang in his blood, and held him close, and consumed his grief. ✧

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## SCIENCE FICTION

"What is the strongest material known to science?" the science teacher asked her fourth graders.

John raised his hand. "The stuff that is used to make the cables for the space elevator."

"Correct. Can you tell me what it is called?"

"Um...uh!"

"Okay, I will tell you this one time. The space elevator cables are made of carbon nanotubes."

## FANTASY

"My father says it is made of unicorn hairs," Chris said.

## HUMOR

"I don't like the space elevator," mumbled Asha.

"Well, you are always free to take the stairs," the teacher said.

## MYSTERY

After class the teacher (her name was Daniella) went home to pack. She was leaving today on a vacation trip to the moon via the elevator.

*Wish Jim and I had not separated,* she thought for the thousandth time of her ex-husband. *He would have enjoyed the trip.*

She was remembering her first trip. "What better place than the moon for a honeymoon?" Jim had said.

At that time, the space elevator didn't launch directly from Earth as it did now. One had to take a shuttle to the space station and

For the moment she was alone in the elevator but she knew that one more passenger would be joining her soon. The elevator carried two and only two passengers on each of its trips.

*I hope I have an interesting companion,* she thought.

Just then the door of the elevator slid open and her fellow traveler entered. It was the man in blue.

"You!" Daniella shrieked when she saw his face.

Jim smiled his characteristically impish smile as he strapped himself into the seat beside her.

The elevator started with a jolt and the increasing acceleration pressed them into their seats.

## MYSTICISM AND SPIRITUALITY

"I had to get you alone for a few days so that we could sort out our problems without the outside world intruding upon us," Jim explained later. It had been an hour since the elevator had left its anchor pad on Earth. The acceleration had eased off and they were nearing zero g.

"I think it was fate. God wanted to get us together again. A month ago, I was about to enter the travel agency downtown in order to explore some vacation options when I saw you coming out of the door. You were as lovely as ever. You seemed preoccupied and didn't see me. The travel agent was my friend so when I asked him about you, he told me you were leaving for the moon. As soon as I heard this, my vacation plans were made. I booked the same elevator for myself and here I am."

"But why were you following me today?"

# Elevator Episodes in Seven Genres by Ahmed A. Khan

catch the elevator from there. It had been fun all the way.

The present trip was her attempt at...what? Catching elusive moments of happiness? Self-inflicted pain? Guilt trip? Exorcism?

It was an impulsive decision and, irrespective of her motivation, she was sticking by it.

She locked her apartment and stepped out of the building, her scanty luggage strapped to her back. It was a cold and windy day. She thrust her hands in the pockets of her coat, turned left on the street and made her way to the intersection. As she walked she had an uneasy feeling that she was being followed. She quickly turned her head and saw a man dressed in a long blue overcoat, face muffled in a scarf, duck behind a store entrance. Suddenly afraid, she walked faster, reached the intersection and hailed a cab.

"Elevator terminal," she said as she quickly clambered into the cab. The driver nodded, started the meter and the cab started moving. She turned back to see the man in blue hail a cab too.

Who was he and why was he following her?

Should she call the police?

But what's the use? It would only delay her and may even make her miss her elevator. She would be at the terminal in a few minutes and after that would be out of this city, out of this world, for two weeks.

Soon, Daniella was in the space elevator waiting for it to start its long journey. She was strapped down in her bucket seat. Another bucket seat lay vacant beside her. She looked at her watch. The elevator should be leaving in about ten minutes. She felt an excitement building up within her, a sense of adventure she had not felt since she was eighteen, ten years ago.

"Oh, you know me. I like playing tricks. Just wanted to scare you a bit, I think."

## HORROR

The space elevator gave a lurch and stopped. Both of them looked up at the view screen. It just showed the blackness of space, interspersed with pinpoints of starlight.

The communicator came alive. "We are sorry to report that there has been a malfunction in the elevator. Please do not panic. Rescue is on its way."

## SEX/ROMANCE

Daniella looked at Jim and Jim looked back at her. Suddenly, as if by tacit agreement, she and Jim undid the straps on their chairs and were in each other's arms, kissing and being kissed passionately.

The communicator sputtered again. "Are you okay? Please respond. Rescue shuttle is being sent out."

The control tower must have been surprised to hear two voices, a male and a female, say simultaneously, "Don't bother."

And after a pause, the male voice added, "At least not for a couple of hours."

## MAINSTREAM

"My teacher is going to the moon on the space elevator," John informed his parents at supper.

"There ain't no such thing as a space elevator," growled his father. "It's all a hoax." ☼





1000.998

15380.029

21909.001

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID GENTRY



Janine first sees the numbers on a Monday afternoon, in week seven of semester two. She is sitting in her Peace, Morality and Justice lecture and Dr Mayerhofer is saying that the massacre of Srebrenica could be taken as the failure of cosmopolitan values in the face of ethnic hatred. She sees the number 1468.953 appear above his head.

It's not very large, in fact if it were any smaller she probably couldn't make it out from where she's sitting. Nor is it very dark, only as if a shadow has gathered together and formed itself into a read-out above his head.

She blinks. The number doesn't go away. It changes to 1468.952.

"Up until Srebrenica," he says, "the international community seemed genuinely committed to upholding human rights. The New World Order of the post-Cold War period looked as if it might become a reality." He pauses for emphasis, looks out across the lecture theatre. The students lean forward, frown, scribble notes and chew the ends of their pens. Janine has stopped taking notes.

She looks at the boy sitting next to her, ready to ask him what that number is and where it's come from, then she sees that he has one too, 3.689. Before she can say anything, the lecture finishes and everyone noisily packs away their notebooks and pens. The boy stands and shuffles out between the narrow white benches, the number still floating over his head.

Dr Mayerhofer stops the hum of the projector with a click, and gathers up his transparencies. A girl in high heels and a short red skirt asks him a question. The fluoro lights are very bright.

He nods and speaks and gives her a paternal smile.

The girl has a number too, 22264.982.

Janine looks down at the white bench, then she closes her eyes. When she opens them again, the number is 22264.981.

A skinny boy in black walks in front of them: 20809.004. The middle-aged woman with the briefcase who walks so briskly up the stairs has 10228.997 above her. And the bloke with the denim jacket and the goatee, standing by the wall waiting for the red skirt girl, has 3.688.

Janine hurries out into the late afternoon warmth. The crowd of students carries her up the slope from Hawken and she sits on the bench by the road.

She wants to lie down for a moment, close her eyes and think, but she is too self-conscious in this crowd of people, hurrying this way and that in their fashionable clothes. Every one has a number floating over their heads.

A middle-aged man sits on the bench on the other side of the road. His number is 7343.075. After a time it changes to 7343.074. Then, to 7343.073. She watches it until it reaches 7343.069, then gets up.

She puts on her sunglasses and, mercifully, everything looks normal again.

At the bus stop she finds her friend Pablo, lining up for the four-two-eight.

"Hi Janine," he says. His usual glowing smile. "How's it going?"

"Were you in that lecture today?" she asks.

"Yeah. I was sitting up the back. Heavy stuff, hey. I'd never even heard of that Sre-bren-ick-a thing before."

"Me neither."

"But I only came in halfway through, maybe that's why you didn't see me."

To say that Pablo is her friend is an overstatement. But they share two lectures and one tutorial and catch the same bus, so he is really the next best thing.

"Were you there for all of the second half?" she asks.

"Yep."

"Can I look at your notes?"

Pablo fishes an exercise book out of his surf-brand backpack and opens it to the appropriate page.

Janine takes off her sunnies and reads his high-school boy handwriting.

"Can I copy these tomorrow?" She looks up and sees 0.209 above his head. The bus roars into the stop.

"Sure," he says. "We can go to the library after the tute. Hey, we should also get together to study for that exam for North-East Asia."

The line is moving.

"Janine." He waves a hand in front of her eyes.

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

She puts the ten trip saver into the slot upside down, and fumbles with it while the people behind her shift impatiently.

The bus is packed and they stand up the back, holding on to the chrome bars.

"Everyone move back," the driver yells. Janine steps back into the tall guy who is hunched behind her and Pablo moves closer to her. She puts her sunnies back on.

Why is his number so low? Every one she's seen so far is at least three figures.

Her stomach lurches when the bus screeches around the roundabout. She pushes her sunglasses up onto her head. 0.207. 0.206.

What will happen when it reaches zero?

"So what have you been up to lately?" she asks.



"Not much, actually. A bit of work. Trying to find somewhere else to live." 0.205. "What about you?"

"Just uni stuff."

"How are the evil flatmates?"

"Still evil." She smiles, even though she is confused.

He looks at her, black eyes, boy-eyebrows, gives her his full attention. "We should hang out more," he says. "Don't you think?"

The bus rounds a corner and Janine falls into him.

"Whoa, Janine." He helps her right herself and somehow this involves his hand on her hip.

"Sorry."

"No problem." He is grinning. His look is too intense. "Anyway, maybe we should get a coffee some time at uni." 0.203.

"Yeah, maybe." She presses the button. "This is my stop." But of course he knows that.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then," he says. "We can talk after the tute."

"Yeah, tomorrow."

The bus slows and then jolts to a stop.

"Excuse me, excuse me," she says as she weaves her way through the passengers to the door.

The bus roars away, leaving her on the grass. She stands there, looks out over Kings Road towards the city, which is just beginning to glow under the darkening sky. Inside her, something feels not quite right.

She heads down Clarence Road into Indooroopilly. Unfortunately, both her flatmates are home. Suzanne (28469.055) is standing in the brown kitchen serving up curry and rice for two and Terri (23725.465) is watching the news.

"Hi guys."

"Oh, hi, Janine," Suzanne says. "I wasn't sure what time you were going to be home. I'm sorry, I've only made enough dinner for two."

"That's all right," Janine says, though she knows she sounds resentful. She is almost always home by six-twenty.

Terri shifts noisily in her beanbag and turns her head. "How was your day, Janine?"

"Not bad." She unplugs the kettle and shoves the spout under the tap.

"Still saving the world?"

Janine turns the tap on too strong and water sprays onto her T-shirt. She lowers the pressure and fills up the kettle.

"It was just lectures," she says, trying to keep her voice level.

"Oh well. Everyone's got to start somewhere."

Suzanne clears out of the kitchen and the two of them sit in front of the TV, eating their curry with sporks.

Janine finds some cheese in the fridge and makes cheese on toast. While waiting for it to grill, she stares at the news over her flatmates' heads. A woman has been murdered in Geebung, possibly by her uncle. Three people have drowned at a beach in Western Australia.

Her head is filled with two thoughts. One is that Pablo's number will still be going down, as the bus makes its way through Indooroopilly and out to Chapel Hill. The other is that he might have been cracking onto her. And she's not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

She takes her watch off and holds it up so its close to Suzanne's number in her field of vision. She times it as it changes from 28469.053 to 28469.052 to 28469.051, and each time it takes just over one minute and twenty-five seconds.

Why is she seeing numbers?

Her mother calls. Janine sits on the carpet next to the phone with the plate on her lap and her tea next to her.

"How are the girls?" Mum asks. "Are you all getting on well?"

"Yes, it's fine." Janine glances over to Terri and Suzanne, whose heads are leaning together in some whispered conversation. Now they are watching *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

"We're coming to Brisbane tomorrow, blossom."

"Really? What for?"

"To visit Grandma. You haven't been to see her recently, have you?"

"No, I haven't had time. It's two buses, so it takes me almost an hour to get there." She doesn't mention how much the dementia-specific nursing home where her Grandma lives depresses her.

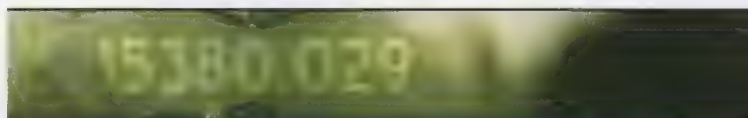
"Well, we'll take you with us. Will you have time tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yep. No problem."

When she hangs up, she looks over at Terri and Suzanne and sees that the numbers have each gone down by more than one hundredth. She gets out her old high school calculator. If a number goes down one thousandth every 86 seconds or so, then Pablo's number will reach zero in 17630 seconds, or in just under five hours.

She doesn't see him on the bus the next morning, so she figures that he came in earlier to go to the library.

The tute room is in the depths of the old sandstone Michie build-



ing, windowless and with air-conditioning that sounds like rain on a distant tin roof. The tutor (dreadlocks, faded Jabiluka T-shirt, 15130.122) calls Pablo's name as she goes through the roll, but there's no answer.

"Okay," she says, shuffling her notes. "What I want to focus on today is Boutros-Ghali's suggestion that the UN is 'struggling against the culture of death.'"

Janine watches the door, listens to footsteps in the corridor.

"Janine, what do you think about this man Ahmed Ould Abdallah and the preventive diplomacy he's doing in Burundi?"

She hesitates. She remembers this from the reading, an ambassador who spends his time ringing up politicians and telling them to act like grown-ups, trying to convince warlords not to kill each other.

"I think it's very impressive," she says at last. "It sounds as if, by what he's doing, he's managed to prevent thousands of deaths."

"What a tough job, though," a girl in a smart jacket says (2.893). Murmurs of agreement around the room.

After the tute, she goes to the library and lines up for fifteen minutes to use an email terminal. *Hi Pablo, just wondering what happened to you this morning. We had an interesting tute. Do you still want to catch up to study for POLS2205? Cheers, Janine.*

She has a prearranged lunch meeting every Tuesday with her friend Michelle and she walks the long way to the refec, around the childcare centre.

Through the gaps in the tall fence, she can see the little kids running around between plastic play equipment. One girl with fuzzy black hair sits on a small plastic table plaiting a doll's hair. Janine pushes her sunnies up onto her head. The girl's number is 29941.665. That's the highest she's seen yet.

Janine tries to remember what it was like to be a little kid. She can't recall much before grade one, when her family moved from Brisbane to Stanthorpe. Little kids always look so cute and happy, even when they are upset. But she remembers how much she used to cry when she was left out of games. She remembers the shame



she felt after having bitten another girl at school, the fear of the bush at night on the farm – emotions so powerful they almost drowned her.

Most of the other children have big numbers, too, the majority of them over twenty-thousand, except for a chubby blond boy with only 3740.325, a very small girl with soft red hair who has 12050.332, and a drooling toddler with 743.330.

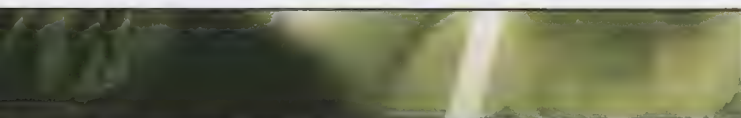
Michelle doesn't show up, so Janine eats her sandwich alone in the refec, wishing she'd brought something to read.

She gets out her calculator. Fifteen thousand (the tutor's number) divided by 365 is 41 point something.

So perhaps the number is in days.

If 24 hours is 86400 seconds, then it would make sense that the figure went down one thousandth every 86.4 seconds.

Around her people chat and complain to each other. She notes their numbers, hanging over them, and calculates quickly. Old guy in tweed jacket saying "The Bendigo Bank is a really interesting case": 17.9 years. A blonde, tanned girl she recognises from one of her lectures: a fraction of a year. Two international students wearing floral veils, chattering and laughing: just over three years for both of them. Their numbers are only a day apart, so she wonders if they'll be together.



If they'll be together when they die. Because that's what it is. That's what it must be.

Janine's chair screeches as she stands up and packs away her lunchbox. She hurries to the bathroom, throws open the door and marches up to the mirror. But there is nothing, no number above her own head.

Of course there isn't. She would have seen it last night when she was brushing her teeth, or this morning.

She stares at her face for a long time, until its shapes lose all meaning.

When Dad arrives in the afternoon, she is pleased to see that he has more than 12000 days, 33 years. He is already fifty-six, so this is really the best she could have hoped for. Mum is already at the home, he says. She had a few things to pick up in town, and she's playing Scrabble with Grandma.

As they drive along the inner-city bypass, a knot of fear twists in Janine's stomach.

At the old people's home dad has to look in his wallet for the piece of paper with the access code written on it. Just inside a woman stands behind a walking frame. She stares at Janine as Dad opens and closes the door. 15.843. Her white hair is a light fluff over her blotchy scalp. The hands on the frame tremble.

Dad leads Janine down a corridor, through the TV lounge where old, desiccated women stare at the news (three dead in a road accident on the New England Highway; a man in the Netherlands euthanised). They round the corner to the sitting room where her mother and grandmother will be. Janine's heart is pounding.

They are sitting on brown couches arranged at right angles. Grandma is wearing a shapeless floral dress and a brown cardigan. Her white hair hangs lank around her face.

Janine almost melts with relief. Grandma has 3329.950, almost ten years. That is more than they could ever have hoped for.

But Mum has only 123.897.

"Janine!" Mum cries. She rises from the couch, enfolds her daughter in a hug. Her perfume fills Janine's head.

"What's wrong, blossom?" she asks, stepping back. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine. Nothing wrong," Janine forces a smile.

"I don't know, darl," Dad says. "We saw a pretty ghostly-looking person at the front door."

Something cold and hard solidifies in Janine's chest.

"John! You shouldn't say things like that."

Dad smiles, then sits down next to Grandma. Janine sits next to Mum, watching the number.

"I think it's my move, Deborah," Grandma says.

"Yes, Mum, go ahead."

Grandma slowly lays out the word FURRY. She sits back and smiles with satisfaction.

"Mum, you know who this is," Mum says, putting her hand on Janine's shoulder. "It's our daughter, Janine."

This is a moment Janine usually hates, but right now it's almost comfortingly routine. Grandma looks at her, frowns, and says, "Of course it is. I didn't recognise her at first because she's grown so much. You really are a big girl now." She turns away and fishes more Scrabble pieces out of the upturned box.

Another old woman approaches (1276.098). She shuffles towards Grandma and points at the pieces.

"Can I have one of those?" she says. "Just to put in my mouth?"

"They're made of plastic, dear," Mum says. "They're not for eating."

After a few moments, the woman says, "Oh. They look so nice. Can I have one to put in my mouth?" She reaches out with a veined and shaking hand.

Grandma lifts the box and moves it to her other side. "No, you can't, you bitch!" she says. "I wish you would just bloody well piss off."

"Mum," Janine's mother says.

"Don't "Mum" me, Deborah. She's completely fucking mad. I shouldn't have to put up with this. This place is a complete mad-house."

The old woman stands, her face fixed on the Scrabble pieces. Grandma gives her a death-stare. Eventually she shuffles off towards the TV lounge.

Mum and Dad take Janine to a café in St Lucia for dinner, where she tries to answer their questions about uni and her flatmates, and Mum keeps asking her if she's feeling all right and if there isn't something wrong that she's not telling them about.

They drop her off at the flat and stand outside to say goodbye.

"Take care of yourself, blossom," Mum says, hugging her.

"I will. You take care of yourself."

Again the familiar perfume, which makes it seem as if Janine couldn't be right. She is going mad. There are no numbers, she's crazy, making it all up, stressed, over-tired, lacking in vitamin B.

Mum steps back and smiles at her, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. "When are you going to come home and see us, darling?"

Janine clears her throat. "I don't know. Maybe not until the holidays. I've got a couple of midsemesters and then I've got all these assignments."

"Well, it will be really nice to see you when you do come home."

"Don't worry. I'll come."

Mum hugs her one last time and they get into the car and drive off.

The next morning Janine has a fight with Suzanne about who gets



the last piece of bread. They stand in the kitchen shouting at each other for fifteen minutes until Janine storms off to her room without breakfast.

She cries for a while, trying not to make any noise. Then she spends the rest of the morning reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She goes to uni early, lines up to use the email terminals, types her password with shaking hands.

She closes her eyes as the messages download. Please God, let there be one from Pablo. But there isn't. Only stuff from the library and porn spam.

She searches for him on the web and finds only references to his basketball career at Brisbane State High. Then she searches the *Courier-Mail* website, and finds nothing.

A guy she knew once told her that whenever a train is delayed by more than about twenty minutes, it's because someone has thrown themselves in front of it. That's how long it takes them to clean it up, and to get a new driver for the train because the other driver is too traumatised to keep working.

Janine wonders if this is true.

She shoulders her bag and walks to the lecture. He must have died. Otherwise he would have answered her. If a message had been there, it would have proved that the numbers don't mean anything, that she was wrong about her mother.

She takes the long route and ends up being late, so she slips in up the back as quietly as possible. *Beowulf* this week.

After a while she stops taking notes and watches the people in the theatre, noting their deaths. Dr Briggs has thirty-five years left, and he's already over fifty. He could probably teach this course sixty more times before he dies, if they kept running it in both semesters.

This must be a form of insanity. There must be a name for it: numeromania. Maybe it's caused by a chemical imbalance, something congenital that doesn't show up until a certain age, or until something triggers it off. It would make more sense if she'd had an obsession with numbers as a child, or if she'd had an aversion to numbers, or...something.

Perhaps she has just manifested her latent psychic powers. Psychic powers aren't supposed to show up in numbers, though, they're supposed to be auras in pretty colours and visions and feelings. But this could just be the way that her brain processes the input, turning a newly-acquired death-sense into a numerical read-out, like the way synaesthesia makes people taste colours.

Or she's just crazy.

Then she notices two girls who have, respectively 0.417 and 0.426.

She puts down her pen. She watches the figures drop, every 86.4 seconds.

Maybe it's because of God. Maybe there is such a thing as God, who has given her this knowledge.

For a moment this thought is simply too frightening. Her head drops into her hands and she listens to her own breath flowing in and out of her nostrils.

There has to be a reason for it. It has to be so that she can help people, do her own preventive diplomacy to stop death in its tracks.

She looks up. The girls are not the sort of people she would normally hang out with. The small thin one has lank black hair and wears a torn yellow T-shirt over a black top. The taller and heavier one has a faded pink tracksuit top and long brown hair done in tiny plaits. Tryhard *somebodies*, she doesn't know what.

When the lecture finishes, Janine walks up to them and says to the shorter girl, "Hi, I was wondering if I could photocopy your notes from that lecture. I was late and missed the first part."

"Oh," says the girl, looking a bit stunned. "You can if you want,

but Sarah takes better notes than me."

"I don't mind if you copy mine," says the taller girl. "Do you want to walk to the bio sciences library now?"

"Sure, thanks." Janine's heart is pounding. The three of them file out of the theatre and amble down the road. "My name's Janine, by the way," she says, putting on her sunnies.

"I'm Adeline," says the shorter girl.

"Sarah," says the other.

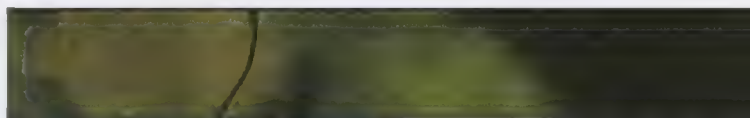
When they reach the photocopier, Janine tries to make conversation. "Are you guys enjoying the course?"

"Not really," Adeline says, hitching one hip onto a desk and swinging her leg under her patchwork skirt. "I love the literature itself, but I think they take the wrong approach to it."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, I guess you have to ask what *Beowulf* is really about." She actually looks at Janine now, eyes bright. "I mean, what he said today about all the gift-giving and the importance of the hall and everything, don't you think it's just a bit irrelevant?"

Janine doesn't remember anything about gift-giving. "I don't know. What do you think is the important part?" She opens the lid of the photocopier and turns the notes over to the next page. The line of green light passes under her fingers.



"I think it's all about death, actually."

Janine swallows. "How so?"

"Well, I mean, Grendel is this monster, and I think he represents death. He is death. He's just so dark and unknown and forbidden."

"And what about his mother?" Sarah says. "She's kind of like a sort of death mother, like the Hindu goddess Kali. Or like in *Aliens*."

"Gee, that's really interesting," Janine says. It's working. Get them talking, listen to what they have to say, make sure they don't do anything dangerous, watch over them.

She hands the exercise book back to Sarah and gathers up the warm copies. "Thanks for that. Do you guys want to get a coffee downstairs or anything?"

"We're too poor for coffee," Adeline says. "Our place is just near here. We're going to go home and drink some red wine. You can come too."

Janine had planned to go to the library and prepare for her exam tomorrow, but this seems more important. She doesn't ask how wine could be cheaper than coffee.

The three of them cross the oval and walk off the campus. Green grass beneath Janine's runners, fluffy clouds dotting the sky, jacarandas just about to shower the world with their purple. She is doing the right thing.

Adeline and Sarah's place is in a block of brick flats only five minutes' walk from uni. Adeline unlocks the flywire door and lets them in. The kitchen, just inside the door, smells of unwashed dishes and a sink of dirty water. Sarah walks through to the dark living room (heavy curtains drawn over French doors, no other windows) and gestures to the brown couch.

"Take a seat. Do you want a glass of water?"

"Sure, thanks." Janine sits on the couch obediently, and finds herself facing a small TV on a cardboard box. There are two other chairs: inflatable plastic ones, translucent green and pink; posters on the wall (Escher, Einstein, unicorns) and clothes on the floor.

"It's a pretty cool place." She tries to sound enthusiastic.



"It's our place," Sarah says proudly, bringing over two glasses of water and sitting with a squeak in the green armchair.

"Thanks." Janine sips the town water, wondering what happened to the red wine.

Adeline emerges from one of the other rooms, holding a slim red and white paperback. "Here." She hands it to Janine. "You should read this, it's the most brilliant book, very profound."

"Thanks." Janine takes it from her. "*Catcher in the Rye*. I've heard of it, but never read it."

"It's just about my favourite book of all time."

Adeline goes to the kitchen and comes back with a box of matches. She lights six candles of varying shapes and sizes on the coffee table. Janine hopes she'll open the window and let some air in, but no such luck.

"What's it about?" she asks as Adeline sits down at the other end of the couch.

"Basically, it's about this kid who doesn't want to grow up. He spends a few days walking around New York and wondering what to do with himself. And he thinks everyone he meets is a phony."

"Sounds interesting."

A long, awkward silence follows and Janine opens the book and pretends to read the first page. Maybe the silence is only awkward for

her. Maybe Adeline and Sarah spend a lot of time staring at candles.

She closes the book and looks up at them, hoping for inspiration. Their numbers are 0.375 and 0.384.

"You can borrow it if you like," Adeline says.

"Thank you." A mark of trust if nothing else. Janine slips it into her backpack. "What other courses are you guys doing?" she asks, and this sparks a few minutes of conversation, before silence takes over again.

Janine glances at Adeline and sees that her face has fallen into lines of deep melancholy.

"Hey, Janine," she says, getting up. "Do you want to see something cool?"

"Sure."

"You have to close your eyes and hold out your hands."

Janine obeys. Green afterimages of candle flames float before her eyelids. She hears Adeline's footsteps go into the next room and then she hears the door close.

She waits, and Adeline takes ages. So Janine's mind wanders, from the girls' impending death to the exam of tomorrow to her mother, where it gets trapped. Her mind fills with an image of her, sitting opposite Janine in the café and eating chicken caesar salad, pouring a third cup of Earl Grey, dark and tanniny, from the stainless steel pot, fixing Janine with her bright, searching gaze.

Further back, in year twelve, there is the memory of her mother's high heels on the verandah as she was getting home from work. The look of subdued disapproval she used to have when she stood at the threshold of Janine's room and looked down at the piles of library books and newspapers on the floor. The sound of her muddling her way through Chopin when she could be persuaded to play, frowning and pausing at least once every page to comment on her rustiness.

Adeline returns and drops a heavy metal object into Janine's hands.

"Adeline," Sarah hisses.

The object is very cold. Janine closes her fingers around it and recognises a half-familiar shape. She opens her eyes. She was right.

She is holding a smooth black handgun, like every one she's ever seen in the movies.

Sarah looks worried. Adeline is smiling, self-satisfied.

"Pretty cool, hey?"

Janine looks at it, lying on her palms. "Yeah."

She feels suddenly very cold.

"Haven't you ever seen a gun before?"

"Sure," Janine says, the kind of guns that people have on farms to shoot snakes and roos and noisy miners, not the kind that are for shooting people. "Is it loaded?" She looks up at Adeline, then looks quickly back at the gun, as if by keeping her eyes on it she can contain it.

"Of course it's loaded." Adeline laughs. "It wouldn't be any fun if it wasn't loaded." 0.372.

If Janine knew how, she could take the bullets out, but she doesn't.

She never should have come here. This thought hits her in the stomach with a thud.

"So, what do you guys do with this?" she says.

"Aw, this and that. Whatever we feel like." Adeline giggles again.

Sarah's face is frozen. 0.361.

"Can I borrow it?" Janine asks.

"What for?" Adeline says. "You wouldn't go and do something naughty, would you?"

A wave of revulsion comes over her. The thing in her hands almost pulses, a black instrument of death. "I just want to show it to some friends," she says. "You could take the bullets out, if you want."

Adeline's lips thin in a reptilian smile. "I think you should give it back to me, now, Janine."

"Oh, really. Why is that?"

A pause. Janine's heart beats double time.

"It's my gun," Adeline says. "It was given to me."

Janine grabs her bag and leaps from the couch. She runs around the right side of the couch, away from Adeline. She reaches the fly-wire door and wrenches it open, but Adeline's hand is already on hers. "WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

Janine turns and presses the barrel against Adeline's T-shirt. "You let go of me," she says quietly.

Adeline doesn't move. She holds Janine's other hand, squeezes it painfully. "You'd never do it." She spits in Janine's face.

If Janine shoots Adeline, then takes the gun, Sarah might live.

She can feel Adeline's breathing, her ribcage rising and falling against the barrel. She is going to die anyway, so what difference does it make?

Behind her, Sarah stands frozen. Her number is 0.362.

Adeline's eyes are an icy blue, ringed with heavy eyeliner. Beneath the freckles, her face is flushed. But her number is 0.371. Her death is hours away.

Adeline grabs the gun and wrenches it away. "You get the fuck out of here!" she cries, turning the barrel towards Janine.

Janine opens the door and thunders down the stairs, almost slipping as she goes around the landing.

She doesn't stop running until she reaches Clarence Road.

At home, she sits on her bed for a while. She is alone.

After about half an hour she goes out and washes the dishes. The blank eye of the TV stares at her. There is no sound except for the distant traffic and the slosh and clink of the dishes. When everything has been dried and neatly put away, Janine sits on the couch, with her knees pulled up against her chest, and thinks long and hard about going back to the girls' flat.

Eventually she gets the telephone book out of the cupboard and looks for Cubilla. There are only three listings. She carries the book



over to the telephone and sits on the carpet.

The first one doesn't answer.

The second one says, "Pablo? We don't have any Pablos in our family."

The third one says, "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"My name is Janine Elston, I'm a friend of his from uni."

It's the voice of a young woman, a very tight voice. "Pablo passed away."

Janine can't bring herself to say anything.

"It was allergies. Anaphylactic shock."

"I'm so sorry," she manages, at last.

The woman sounds like a receptionist. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

It's on the radio the next morning. Two young women, aged seventeen and eighteen, were found dead in their St Lucia apartment. Neighbours called the police after hearing gunshots. They were identified as Adeline Watson and Sarah Moffat.

"Oh my God," Suzanne says. "Oh my God, that's just so near here. Just think, that could have been us. Doesn't that terrify you, Janine?"

"They said it was probably suicide."

"Did they? Well, that's a relief."

Janine throws out the rest of her toast and goes to her room. It couldn't have been *us*, or certainly not Suzanne, who has decades left to enjoy.

She opens her backpack and takes out the books she doesn't need today. There is the red and white book, *Catcher in the Rye*. She opens it. Adeline has written her name in curly handwriting on the first page. She should really take this to the police, tell them what happened, but not now, not today.

Stupid girls.

Then she is crying uncontrollably, and this goes on for some time.

The exam starts at ten a.m. and Janine doesn't get to uni until ten to. At the door to the room, an old woman gives her a little card with a number on it. She dumps her bag at the back of the room and finds her desk. She doesn't take off her sunglasses.

The room is filled with one person tables set in uniform rows with uniform spaces between them. She fills out the paperwork and puts her student card on the desk. Chairs scrape loudly as the room fills. Ballpoint pens scratch on paper.

"You have ten minutes perusal, beginning now. During this time you may not write in your exam book."

Janine opens the book and pulls out the green sheet with the questions on it. She knows that she should understand them, but she doesn't.

One of the supervisors picks up her student card and her identification slip.

"Put your waterbottle under your chair, dear," she whispers.

Janine does so. She looks up and sees 0.006.

Will the woman have a heart attack and keel over right there?

Janine watches her move to the next person in the row, a bearded, serious-looking guy with thick black glasses, no more than twenty-five years old. Also 0.006.

She scans the room. The number is almost the same for everyone, except at the front of the room where some of them are a little higher.

So, the end of the world? No, it couldn't be. She's seen too many large numbers. A bomb, then, or an earthquake, a fire, a bolt of lightning?

She watches the others make essay plans in the margins of their

green question papers. The numbers reach 0.003.

Janine turns in her chair and looks around the room. They all have low numbers, only minutes left. Not a single person she could save.

Save. But save from what? Save how? Suddenly the concept loses its meaning.

0.002.

Around her they are all writing, biting the ends of their pens, frowning in concentration. She closes her eyes.

She opens them again. 0.001. With a screech, Janine pushes back her chair. She leaves the pens, student card and waterbottle and walks to the door.

The old woman stops her. "I'm afraid you can't leave yet," she says, "it's not allowed."

Janine shouts, "Everyone needs to get out of the room. Or we'll all die!"

The woman looks at her in horror. Everyone stops writing.

"Call security," the old woman says to the man at the front of the room. "Now, you be quiet and sit back down."

Janine pushes past her, breaks into a run. There is shouting and movement as she throws open the door. She runs out the corridor, round the corner, and into the open.

She shouts, "Get away from the building!" but her voice is drown-

ed out by a boom from behind. A wave of heat hits her back. She runs and runs, through the tables of the refec courtyard and up the steps.

When she looks back, people run past her, screaming and crying, faces contorted. A cloud of smoke and dust rolls towards her, rises from the building. There is a tremendous crash. She wonders what those people looked like at the moment of death, a whole room of 0.000.

There is another crash. More people run past her. Some of them have very low numbers, so will probably be dead in some hospital before the next morning.

Someone trips on the steps, a young pregnant woman in high heels (17880.048), clutching a spotted little bag. Janine helps her up, then watches her run off.

Smoke fills the courtyard, overlaid with the smell of burning plastic and so much dust. Everything is burning; the heat washes over her. Janine's eyes water. People pour out of the union building; the automatic door opens and closes and opens and closes. The plump woman from the refec checkout hurries up the stairs. A man screams, a long and drawn-out wail.

On the steps near her, three guys in polo shirts and surf shorts stare in disbelief, one of them crying openly (23731.209, 2998.377, 15687.988). An African woman in a blue suit runs past, clutching a small girl to her chest (15430.472, 20004.589). The hot sun shines through the swirling haze.

Soon the outdoor area of the refec is almost clear of people. A breeze blows the smoke away from Janine.

At one of the tables, a red-haired guy sits clutching his leg and crying. He isn't going to die for twenty-three thousand days, but right now, he is in pain.

Janine walks down the steps and crosses the dusty, rubbish-strewn bricks to his side. He looks up at her, white-faced. His hands are pressed against his leg and blood seeps between his fingers. Janine unties her cardigan from around her waist and wraps it around his



leg as tightly as possible. He pants while he watches her work.

"Thanks," he says.

"You'll be okay."

She waits with him until the ambulances arrive.

Thirty-two hours later, she is on the bus. It leaves Brisbane and the sun sets. Her heavy bag is in the luggage hold underneath and her backpack is on her knee.

She turns the reading light off and watches the dark paddocks and trees pass the window. Then the houses and lights of Ipswich. Then the highway again, the winding ascent to Cunningham's Gap, and they are over the Great Dividing Range.

Thirty-five k's to Warwick, then seventy-nine to Stanthorpe. Her parents don't know she's coming.

In Stanthorpe, she calls them from a public phone.

"I've come home for a bit," she says. "I thought it would be a surprise."

Dad picks her up in the station wagon, enfolds her in a bear hug.

"I'm so glad you've come," he said. "Are you feeling better today?"

She nods.

"It's like a warzone up there. What are people blowing up buildings for?"

She sighs. "They don't know, Dad."

They drive past dark hills, dotted here and there with the lights of houses.

"Everyone's been asking about you. In the paper it said you were in the room, but you left to go to the toilet or something."

She can hear in his tone that he's surprised she didn't say more about this on the phone.

"Dad, I knew those people were going to die."

There is the sound of the tyres on the dirt road.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but I knew."

Dad keeps driving, up the hill, round the bend, onto another straight stretch.

"What do you mean you knew?"

"I just knew."

"How did you know?" His tone is very serious, probably humouring her.

"I can just tell. That's how I knew to leave the room. It's just this thing. I can tell when people are going to die." Her voice sounds not like her own. Can he really be understanding her? "I'll understand if you don't believe me."

Trees rush past the window. Dad slows the car when there's a hare caught in the headlights. They watch it hop off the road.

"Of course I believe you. You're my only daughter. Why wouldn't I believe you?"

"Well..."

"So, you're saying that you know, like some psychic, that people are going to die?"

"Yes."

"Jesus."

She lets the silence roll out.

"Like I said, I'll understand if you don't believe me."

"Of course I believe you. I just have to think about it for a while."

She is unutterably relieved.

"Do you know when I'm going to cark it?" His question comes out of the dark night.

"Yes."

"Shit." A silence. "Excuse my French, Janine." He's driving quite slowly now, swerving around the familiar potholes. "When is it?"

Janine opens her mouth, but he says, "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

They are not far from home now. Out here the sky is filled with stars, so many more than she can ever see in Brisbane.

"How long...is this a new thing?"

"Yes, just recently."

"Fucking hell. Sorry, Janine. Well." He looks over at her, then back at the road, then over at her again.

They don't speak for the rest of the drive, and the silence is sometimes heavy and sometimes comfortable.

Eventually the car pulls into the drive. The lights in the house are on.

"I'm not going to tell Mum about this," Janine says.

"Why not?"

"I'm just not."

He looks at her. His hands are still on the wheel. "Okay. Whatever you say."

They get out of the car and slam the doors. Dad takes Janine's bag from the boot.

It is so quiet out here.

Mum rushes out of the house, hugs Janine, enfolds her in her perfume.

"What a nice surprise, honey!" she says. "It's so lovely to see you."

She puts a hand on Janine's shoulder and guides her inside, into the warm, brick-walled kitchen.

"I've put the kettle on and I've got some dinner in the oven? Have you eaten yet?"

"No."

"And how long are you going to stay?"

"Um, well, I'll have to go back to Brissie next week to get some stuff and to sort out things with the girls, but otherwise I'm home for good."

"For good? What about your studies?"

This is the question she's been waiting for, and she pulls out her mentally rehearsed speech. "They can wait. I'm going to take the rest of the semester off and stay down here with you and Dad, maybe get a job or something. I've already withdrawn from my subjects. I'll have a HECS debt from them, but I don't really care about that. I want to spend some time with you and Dad."

"Well..." Mum looks at her across the green bench. "Well I guess it's your decision. But I think you should think about it very carefully."

"Don't worry, I have."

Her tone becomes delicate. "We know that what happened...must have been difficult. But maybe it would be better to keep yourself busy."

"I've made my decision."

Dad stands in the doorway, watching them and listening. Janine knows exactly what he's thinking, and it makes her heart ache.

"Can I have a cup of tea, too, darl?" he says. And he sits down on a stool next to where his daughter is standing, and life goes on. ✨

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For John W. Campbell, Darwin was humanity's sunniest hope. Cannily recognising that what *Astounding* readers wanted was reassurance that their vestigial social skills and poor personal hygiene were merely symptoms of their true status as Slan-like masterpeople whose destiny was to inherit the galaxy, he kept open house for warming fables of enlightened mutant psi-people triumphing over persecution and ushering in a new dawn for humankind whether the benighted hom-saps liked it or not. Over in Oakland, however, the young Philip K. Dick was having none of this, and in the amphetamine summer of 1953 wrote 'The Golden Man', set in a world of rampant mutation contained by ruthless state extermination programmes which finally meet their match in a beautiful but feral youth whose consciousness is not limited to the present moment. With the power to view ahead and choose paths in time as easily as old-style humans do in space, Dick's golden child effortlessly eludes his captors, and escapes to father a grim new race of post-intelligent humans who will no longer need to be doing with language, culture, or anything else very much. If the Campbellian superpeople were indeed to emerge, Dick mischievously argued, they'd hardly be good news for the rest of us, let alone for the species.

But in a way that even the golden man of fifties SF could hardly have foreseen, Campbell was right all along about fanboys inheriting the Earth. The summer of 2007, as nobody could fail to notice, is the first in film history to be dominated by mature blockbuster franchises that have already evolved beyond sequel stage, and which are being forced to explore new kinds of narrative and new kinds of relationship with their audience that simply baffle traditionally-minded non-geek viewers. As fan culture becomes mass culture, big texts make demands on their audiences that only the obsessive are able to meet in full, through multiple viewings, community-based discussion, cross-reference with

exotexts, and in the most extreme cases direct engagement with the creators. Yet these very processes only serve further to alienate viewers who cling to old ways of experiencing film, as single-serving hero-centred narratives in non-persistent universes securely bounded by the opening and closing credits.

It's therefore an appropriate irony that Dick's own vision has been turned round 180° in Lee Tamahori's *Next*, "based on the novel story 'The Golden Man' by Philip K. Dick." Whatever new textual species a "novel story" might represent, *Next* is actually a bit more than just another increment to the canon of overblown chase films namechecking early PKD speed-shorts, with an unusually instructive evolutionary history of its own. *Next* began, like *Minority Report*, from a script by Gary Goldman, the final writer on *Total Recall* and the Dick estate's most tireless Hollywood drumbanger. But unfortunately for Goldman, a sincere and serious PKD fan who has always tried to make a virtue of fidelity to Dick's themes, the film version was commissioned to be written for Nicolas Cage, who not only is neither youthful nor golden but is still working off his thwarted life's ambition to play Superman. The result of these adaptive pressures is a mutant inversion of Dick's concept into one that Campbell would thoroughly approve – with the mutant now hero rather than nemesis, civilised and sensitive rather than mindless and self-absorbed, hounded only for the usual superhero reasons that his use of his powers for good is misinterpreted because nobody ever sees the disasters he averts, and sought by the feds not to "euth" him but to preempt a terrorist plot unfolding in downtown L.A.

Now, in fact Goldman's own draft worked quite hard to keep what it could of Dick's story within these constraints, including the title and (crucially) the mutant's drive to propagate. But the gimmick of *Next* is that if one draft of your plot doesn't do what you want it to, you can always go back for a rewrite; and in this case Goldman's version passed into the hands of the egregious Jonathan Hensleigh, purveyor of preposterous action scripts from *Die Hard III* to *The Punisher*, who has duly worked his trademark magic with a much sillier final act that leaves Dick's narrative entirely behind for a gear-crashing shift

into 24 homage. (Goldman's original ending rewound the entire plot without allowing our hero to confront the terrorists at all, which was in a way the whole point, but you can see why he was never going to get away with it.) Hensleigh has tried to tauten the plot sinews a bit by introducing a time limit of two minutes to how far Cage can see into his future; but as he's had to exempt the two key prognostications on which the entire plot is built, the result is if anything less rather than more coherent. He's also succumbed to the inevitable pressure to snazz Cage's character up a bit, further promoting him from professional gambler to Vegas stage conjuror; while Hensleigh's solution to making the most of the gorgeous Arizona locations has been to move a central sequence to the CLIFFHANGER MOTEL, located right on the lip of a CLIFF, with an assortment of heavy plant perched precariously RIGHT ON THE EDGE. It doesn't take a precog to see what's going to happen next.

Yet for all this, *Next* does offer an interesting glimpse into the future of action plotting and the kinds of evolve-or-die challenge new media environments are already starting to pose. Time-twist narrative is a notorious elephant trap for Hollywood plotting, which has enormous difficulty with the inflexibility it imposes on narrative structure and sequence, to say nothing of the non-negotiable commitment to closed and explicit story logic. Back in the spring we had *Premonition*, which had the ingenious idea of reshuffling the days of Sandra Bullock's most traumatic week, only to screw it up totally with a colossally stupid and glaring blunder in the plot continuity that made instant nonsense of the attempt. *Next* is quite a lot better than that, for all its millstone casting and inert romantic chemistry. If little of Dick's thematic agenda survives, it's still a technically adventurous film that tries to do something new and challenging with film storytelling devices for a generation grown fluent in the tropes of post-linear narrative in other media, where the problem-solving of plot is not a one-shot process, and regression to earlier forks in the path is permitted to viewpoint characters. At its best, *Next* recognises and celebrates the fact that narrative is evolving in ways that may ultimately undermine, as its own ending does, the values of linearity and closure on which film itself has depended.



MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE





**A**nother hopeful monster lumbers into view in **Pirates of the Caribbean 3: At World's End**, a strange and fascinating spectacle which may be the harbinger of a new form of cinema or may simply be the last of the dinosaurs: an unremitting typhoon of plotting that carries its viewers off the edge of the known world and back again, across an ocean of intertwined pursuits and double-crosses to a final vertiginous descent into an all-consuming maelstrom of ending. Writers Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio are unusual in the industry in their readiness, through their site [wordplayer.com](http://wordplayer.com), to give straight if self-congratulatory answers to baffled fans' questions; and one thing that emerges strongly from the dialogue is that, whatever else this strange film is, its makers are under the sincere impression they know what they're doing, and that what they think they're doing is inventing a new post-classical language of film plotting for audiences trained to handle huge uptakes of information at previously unimaginable speeds. Where explanations and motives seem elided or entirely inexplicable, it's generally either because the writers were consciously trying to move away from on-the-nose expodumps or because something was in there at one stage and got cut for reasons of pacing. In either case, the viewer is credited with competence to figure it out from what's there, with the help of additional viewings and dialogue with other fans. What *World's End* feels most like is a Harry Potter film, with its novelistic convolutions of intrigue and bafflement compacted into dense, busy film plotting for hugely extended running times. But whereas the Potter films can at least be made sense of by going back to the book, the *Pirates* franchise is, aside from a handful of nods to the ride, a work of autonomous invention whose only key is itself.

We're not used to blockbusters this difficult, and not all will feel the rewards are worth the effort. Very few first-time viewers stand much chance of grasping what the pre-title song signifies, or what happens to the Calypso plotline, which seems to peter out so strangely just before the climax; and so far as I can tell the film offers no intimation whatever of what the writers believe to be the true terms of Davy Jones's curse and the Dutchman contract, to the extent that the dialogue repeatedly affirms the opposite. (Apparently this is meant to be unreliable.) There seems to be no explanation at all for the armada's failure to do anything at all after the Endeavour gets trashed, and it's not actually clear that the writers agree between themselves what's actually going on in the crucial Easter-egg scene following the interminable credit crawl ("Ten Years Later," says the caption when you finally get there). But at the very least it has fun with the poetics of pirate plotting, which are built on the attractive premise that everyone's primary instinct is to double-cross everyone else, with the sole inhibitor the continuing usefulness of the prospective doublecrosser. It's a bit startling to see Disney, of all intellectual-property potentates, celebrating the proposition that piracy is heroically romantic and its would-be exterminators commercial fascists. But then this is the first Disney film to hang a child in the opening minutes. It's certainly not the world we thought we knew.

**O**f course it's Marvel who've been the biggest trailblazers and canon-masters in this new fan-fuelled genre of very long films with insane budgets and a massive weight of backstory; and **Spider-Man 3** is a textbook demonstration of the Mighty Marvel Movie Method, where you put three famous storylines from canon in a pit together and withdraw food until they reach an accommodation. As *World's End's* polarised reception confirms, it's an iron law that third films make their landing on a wave of disappointment, but actually there's a lot to like in *Spider-Man 3* after the maudlin and saggy 2. Instead of one severely softened villain, we have three rock-hard ones, whose plotlines been plaited as well as could be expected given that they have nothing whatever to do with one another. Sandman, in particular, is the most resonant and spectacular Marvel movie villain yet seen, blowing through the streets like a living 9/11 duststorm, and you'd have to be made of sandstone not to smile at the post-combat vignette where Spidey tips a pint of sand out of his spider-boots, musing "Where do all these guys come from?" Inevitably the sheer scale of the plot carpentry creaks in places, and sometimes a foot goes through the planking – most startlingly in the (fairly faithful) sequence when the fleeing Flint Marko runs across some waste ground and falls into a sandpit, whereupon we cut to an unheralded roomful of labcoated strangers going "Initiate demoleculisation!" and the light duly tears him to pieces. Gwen Stacy is allowed to drift out of awareness rather than making the expected exit for which her character is mainly famous; while for a predatory alien parasite Venom spends an improbable stretch of the middle of the film hanging harmlessly out in Peter's apartment and listening to the radio, and even after the obligatory MJ dangle-and-scream finale does come rather suddenly together ("Breaking News!"), he does a bit of a Jean Grey's *Last Stand* and seems to go off for a cup of tea during the Sandman fight.

The strange idea to turn the film into a semi-musical with song-and-dance numbers is presumably a concession to the leads, who as always are aware they're absurdly too good for the material; as in 2, but more so, Tobey Maguire seems positively allergic to Spidey's mask, which has a comical tendency to slip off or fall



into tatters whenever any non-stunt acting is called for. But in fairness, the mask does turn off his distinctive star wattage, which is given ample rein here with the adoption of the Venom-possessed dark Spidey and (far more entertainingly) the swaggering dark Peter Parker. ("It amplifies characteristics of its host," we're told, "especially aggression," but also overacting.) And if the jobs for Raimi mates and

relatives are getting a bit out of hand, the regular supporting cast do get more and better to do, particularly JJJ and the landlord/daughter double-act; while James Franco's Mitchum-esque sneer is turned gloriously off and on as he flips between good Harry and gobby Harry, whereas the weepy, trembly-lipped reversion to 2 territory at the end got laughed off the screen, and quite right. Nuff said.



A fan-cherished classic of a different kind comes to the screen in **Bridge to Terabithia**, from Katherine Paterson's 1977 novel of primary-school friendship and fantasy with a sting of reality in the tail. The novel is much less famous here than in the rest of the English-speaking world, so that it's possible to watch the film in ignorance of the defiantly unHollywood you-can't-do-that plot turn where readers are shockingly confronted with what the story is really about. But because the novel is pretty much a sacred text in classrooms across America, there's been mercifully little messing with the storyline – helped, no doubt, by the involvement as screenwriter of Paterson's own son Dan, for whom the novel was originally written. Animation legend Gabor Csupo directs a strong live-action team very well, and if neither of the experienced and capable young leads is ideally cast, AnnaSophia Robb makes a perfectly adequate fist of the part Dakota Fanning turned down, while Josh Hutcherson is particularly good at the hero's accumulated frustrations with family and peers.

And yet, with the best of intentions, the film has made the book into something disquietingly different. The decision to update the action from the seventies to the noughties must have seemed a relatively innocuous one: the story is meant to be a here-and-now story about its readers' own lives, not a period piece. But while the issues of bullying, poverty, class, familial tensions, and the intensity and fragility of ten-year-old friendships are reasonably universal, in other respects the imaginative experience of childhood has changed dramatically in the generation since *Terabithia* was built. A token early reference to the internet and a schoolroom ban on electronic devices can't mask the essential fact that, even in rural Maryland (played here by the Auckland suburbs), children's imaginations have been relentlessly targeted and colonised by media franchises, and that if two ten-year-olds today were to devise a fantasy kingdom it would be a lot less literary than the trolls of *Terabithia*.

More seriously still, the film finds itself sucked into the need that Hollywood itself has created for spectacle in place of suggestion. In the book, the kids' Narnia-derived private mythology was only glimpsed on the periphery, and firmly subordinated to the strictly realistic story frame. The film, conscious that such a novelistic approach to the fantasy elements holds little appeal for the children of Spidey and Sparrow, spares no excuse to expand the improvised play-sketches into full-on CGI action set pieces, which play havoc not only with the rhythm and tone of the story but with its very genre – elaborating a fantasy counter-plot about the "dark master" (they can't, of course, say "lord" or Saul Zaentz will have their gonads on a spit) that never gathers enough coherence to gel. The novel's message was that bad things happen to kids as well, and fantasy and denial are not going to get them through it. But as you might expect from the makers of *LWW*, the film's climactic money shot of the newly bridged *Terabithia* carries the rather different reassurance that poor folks can have Narnia DVDs as well; they just have to imagine it. As the script's catchphrase puts it, "You got to look really hard but keep your mind wide open." Better still, you could simply read a book.

In Hollywood, golden films have no trouble sowing their seed; but it's not often that even the most successful homegrown Britlicks have the luxury of a sequel at all. A rare and welcome exception, **28 Weeks Later** arrives a full five years on from Danny Boyle's original biosplatter apocalypse; even *Resident Evil*, which came out back-to-back with *28 Days Later*, managed two sequels in less time than *Weeks* took on development alone, and there's an awareness that more of the same isn't quite going to cut it when not only *Children of Men* but both *Dawn* and *Shaun of the Dead* have screened in the intermission. Indeed, the opening sequence does an effective job of recapitulating the first film in terms that leave you feeling quite strongly that you really don't want to sit through another of these. And sure enough, *Weeks* begins as a different and more contemporary kind of urban horror, in which a thoroughly Baghdadised London is occupied by the US military in a wildly optimistic effort to put the shattered nation to rights, only for the psycho virus to come thumping on the gates again and plunge Robert Carlyle's kids into a warmly familiar zombie-chase from the Isle of Dogs to Wembley via an impressive gallery of landmark London locations in grey magic hour and deserted Sunday best. It's an old-fashioned, home-made kind of sequel, done on the cheap and with energy, with Rose Byrne and her supporting cast of variously unconvincing pseudo-Americans doing duty for the pricier real thing. There are good twists in the fates of characters, and the first film's vision of a post-apocalypse capital is if anything surpassed; certainly no Londoner could ever wish ill to a film that sets a helicopter zombie-chase in Carter's Steam Fair. As a wry metaphor for the relationship between the British and US film industries in the global media battleground, it starts from the obvious premise that there's no way we can actually win; the best we can hope for is to keep running. That much, at least, can be confidently foreseen. **Nick Lowe**





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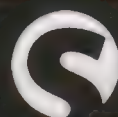
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Created for TV (and novelised) by Neil Gaiman, **Neverwhere** (1996) was recently adapted for the comics medium by Mike Carey and Glenn Fabry, but this disc offers, undoubtedly, the purest version. Mysterious Lady Door (Laura Fraser) leads hapless romantic Richard (Gary Bakewell) on a merry dance through weird shadow realm London Below, encountering darkling strangers with inexplicable motives for bizarre rituals, and freshly iconic, urban-legend figures (like the angel named Islington) of a synthesised yet brilliant mythology. It's a wittily devised metro-centric adventure into a perverse labyrinthine wonderland, an unpredictable journey of self-discovery and affecting heroism for one lonely yet ultimately wise human soul on a daring mission to save the orphaned Door's endangered underworld. Belatedly rescuing this instant classic from obscurity, the welcome DVD release boasts nearly three hours of superb British television that deserves your attention.



Richard Jobson's romantic mystery **A Woman in Winter** looks quite fabulous, yet its flimsy plotline is frequently patience trying, at best. Brilliant astronomer Michael (Jamie Sives) meets quietly enigmatic French photographer Caroline (Susan Lynch), in Edinburgh, where their obsessive yet clichéd affair eventually collapses, in tandem with a local observatory's research into a new supernova. With the hi-tech glamour of a quantum computer, plenty of dazzling space artwork, glimpses into the rich cultural backdrop of Scotland's capital, an amusingly pseudo-intellectual love story conveyed by a talented digital-filmmaker's clever authorial trickery, this splendidly melancholic drama is actually more interesting than good. Brian Cox's amiable consultant doctor furnishes clues but doesn't explain whatever's going on here... A time travelling ghost lover, perhaps? Fascinating art house meditation on the true meaning of coincidence and destiny when measured against a multi-verse of possibilities? Or, simply, another overtly pretentious example of the cerebral male's perpetual bewilderment in a fateful encounter with feminine mystique?

Throwing cerebral intrigues of Cronenberg and cosmic wonders of Lovecraft into the same brainpan, Andrew van den Houten's **Headspace** benefits from a great central performance from newcomer Christopher Denham as Alex, whose prodigious mental powers have opened a 'link' for phantom creatures (brain-eating spawn of Cthulhu?) to enter human reality. Desperate for any help to understand his increasing cognitive gifts, Alex makes quite a nuisance of himself at the New York home of troubled artist and chess grandmaster Harry (Erick Jellenik), but no amount of big-brotherly advice can prevent Alex's frontal-lobe overdrive from a horrifying meltdown, and soon his fragile sanity unleashes homicidal rage upon anyone he touches. With Dee Wallace, William Atherton and Olivia Hussey as the baffled doctors, Larry Fessenden and Sean Young as Alex's parents in the disturbing opening scenes, Mark Margolis as a former eastern bloc scientist (guilt-ridden over KGB weapon experiments on Russian 'links'), and Udo Kier on good form as a disbelieving priest, this US indie production has an impressive supporting cast. Despite unconvincing monster effects, it's an imaginative drama with plenty of successful frights and interesting development of the appealing characters.



The complete **Charmed** (1998–2006) 48-disc boxset is available, packing all eight seasons into a collectible 'treasure chest'. Aaron Spelling's impressive fusion of *Charlie's Angels* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a usually whimsical fantasy show. Created by Constance M. Burge, it concerns the Halliwell sisters Phoebe, Piper, and Paige – who replaces Prue, all using witchcraft to save innocents in San Francisco and elsewhere, and it's wholly underrated if compared to its closest genre-TV rivals. Most famously, the original cast's headliner Shannen Doherty was replaced by junior Rose McGowan, in season four, but without damage to the show's format or changing the dynamics of its 'power of three' set-up. Showcasing more teleportation per episode than *Star Trek* (possibly more than *The Tomorrow People*), this stubbornly cheerful and quietly feminist comedy-drama is centred on spell-casting adventures in Wiccan rituals, tackling demons, ghosts, and other foes, in a suburban environment. Gently mocking domestic and familial routines, while exploring sibling rivalries, romances, and the maturing lifestyles of glamorous superheroes, *Charmed* profits from likeable supporting characters, while its flawed heroines are not always perfectly ethical role models worthy of their matriarchal inheritance, magic bible/guide 'Book of Shadows'.

The pragmatic handling of elements and lore from classical myths, legends (Roman, Greek, Oriental, Egyptian, Arthurian), fairy tales and various pop culture references (Tolkien, Disney, comic-books, etc), ensures that average episodes include sufficient lively wit and fun. Amusing use of common SF tropes (telepathy, alternate timelines, body-swap identity theft) add cross-genre plot variants to its broad fanbase appeal.

LASER FODDER @ 500 RPM TONY LEE



In **The Lost Room**, writers Laura Harkcom and Christopher Leone retrofit *X-Files* style conspiracies to a *Twilight Zone* jukebox of themes, centred on a derelict motel in New Mexico, the source of everyday objects (key, watch, comb, photo) with quirky magic properties. Joe (Peter Krause, *Six Feet Under*) is a cop whose young daughter vanished in room ten. While Krause is a stereotyped hero, Dennis Christopher (from Vernon Zimmerman's influential *Fade to Black*, 1980) lends the unfolding mystery greater emotive depth as a doctor recruited by sinister cabal The Order. Femme fatale Jennifer (Julianna Margulies, *Mists of Avalon*, *The Grid*) follows a different agenda, representing the rival Legion, but neither group has Joe's interests at heart. Low-key visual effects, and cool usage of each unique prop, supports the wry commentary on corruptive materialism, religious zealotry and factional secret societies (not all misfit collectors believe the 'Occupant theory'), which strengthens an update of the 'fabled-artefacts-quest', of the sort last chronicled in J.J. Abrams's variable *Alias*. Although it fails to engage with the same intensity as recent premier-grade SF series like *Odyssey 5* and *ReGenesis*, this ingenious series of just six episodes is far superior drama to the lacklustre *Surface* and *Revelations*, and it provides a boost for the Sci-Fi Channel's reputation as supplier of quality entertainment.

Maker of the post-millennial *Dracula* trilogy, Patrick Lussier does another typically slick yet unsophisticated job on **White Noise: The Light**, a follow-up the 2005 film starring Michael Keaton. Here, *Slither* and *Serenity*'s Nathan Fillion stars as widower Abe Dale, haunted by grotesque accusatory spectres, while stuck between mourning the violent loss of his wife and son, and newfound social responsibilities as a psychic saviour acting on gifts resulting from his near-death-experience. Muddling together premonitory visions and knotty moral dilemmas, the episodic narrative reveals how honest Abe goes about saving lives (including that of a nurse portrayed by *Battlestar Galactica*'s Katee Sackhoff), but these are the damned, time bombs of horror waiting to happen with calendared pre-determinism. Owing more to the effects-laden *Final Destination* franchise than spooky tragedy *The Sixth Sense* or uncanny classic *Don't Look Now* (allusively referenced here), Lussier's sequel abandons the eerie chills of Geoffrey Sax's original, and is concerned only with recycling familiar psi-fi thrills and jumpy CGI shocks, nosily reinforcing the simplistic message that even an intuitive superhero cannot cheat fate. Disposable entertainment, notable only for its winning streak of knowing humour, including a death-by-falling-piano sequence, and the silly finale's spectacular ambulance chase.

Loading...75% routine indie sci-fi, **Gamebox 1.0** is written and directed by brothers David and Scott Hillenbrand (makers of *King Cobra*), who re-mix *Tron* with *Gamerz*, while also borrowing from Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ* (both of which are cited in dialogue). It all starts as a video-game tester, lovesick Charlie (Nate Richert), receives a futuristic console and VR helmet, apparently controlled by A.I. which lures him into low-rent cyberspace without providing an obvious exit. As he moves through different generic levels of the game, Charlie is reunited with his dead girlfriend Kate (Danielle Fishel) in the guise of a 'Princess' character, and then joins her 'mission' to deliver a locked briefcase acquired during the game's initial noir-mystery scenario. From its early dreamscape pursuits to the first-person-shooter scenes (a POV most effectively presented in *Doom*), cheesy arcade-style graphics maintain consistently pleasing aesthetic values despite the obvious illusory qualities of their design. Bravely establishing depressed geek Charlie as its hero, the Hillenbrands' adventure offers a poignant reminder that mortality is always scarier than monsters, and there's some wonderful animated wallpaper eye-candy to counterbalance the closure's rather trite lesson that real life is the only game worth playing. **Tony Lee**



In the wake of two-disc special editions of *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *Things to Come* (1936), we now have a 50th anniversary DVD of **Forbidden Planet** (1956). Whereas those predecessors were rooted in postwar UFO myths and Wellsian visionary futurism, respectively, Fred M. Wilcox's classic space opera was inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and eagerly anticipates *Star Trek*. So far ahead of its time that its celebrated electronic score (by Bebe and Louis Baron) wasn't considered to be proper music back in the 1950s, this revolutionary MGM production remains the one authentic masterpiece of pulp sci-fi cinema. Revelations about the super-tech legacy of extinct aliens, its scary invisible 'monsters from the id', the weird magic of painted planet-scape backdrops, and a storytelling mode of entrhralling romanticism are just as charming today, especially when viewed as 'Golden Age' antidote to this century's soulless miracles of digital imagery. Amazing!





### The Unknown Terrorist

Richard Flanagan • Atlantic, 336pp, £14.99 hb

### Time's Child

Rebecca Ore • Eos, 336pp, \$14.95 pb

### The Merchant & the Alchemist's Gate

Ted Chiang • Subterranean, 64pp, \$20.00 hb

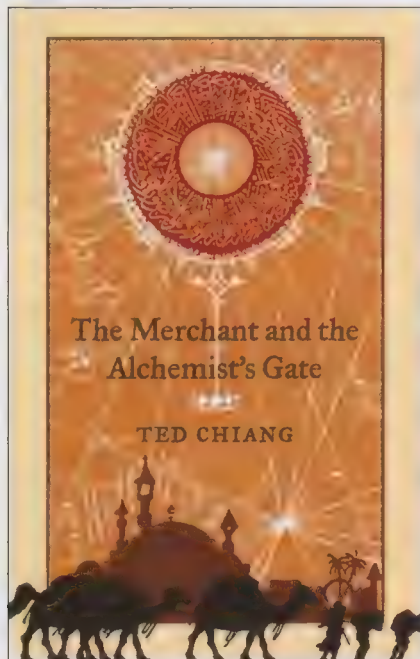
FROM THE AUTHOR OF GOULI'S BOOK OF FISH

RICHARD FLANAGAN



THE UNKNOWN TERRORIST

Australian author, an exhilarating writer Sunday Telegraph



Richard Flanagan, who would have been 45 years old when **The Unknown Terrorist** was first published last year in Australia, is old enough to know what he knows. The great strength (and intermittent exiguity) of this extraordinarily black post 9/11 novel both stem from his determination to tell us exactly what that is. From the very first sentence – “The idea that love is not enough is a particularly painful one” – what he knows is that we have done ourselves in; that we in the World of the West, which includes Australia and New Zealand if you sail in the right direction, are collaborators in the rotting from within of a civilisation whose long disease 9/11 only pulled the log off of.

In a tone of traumatised fever, *The Unknown Terrorist* sniffs along two or three lines of analysis: the interweaving complicities of media and government and police whenever a “terrorism question” surfaces and we must be seen to be protected by magic thinking from a contagion whose habitat is the body politic;

Flanagan tenders old wisdoms about the world as though he had just now learned to utter

the interweaving complicities of money and power and media and government necessary to keep the Disappointment Management culture of the West turning – the consumptions cycles, the debt spirals, the reality show texture of life in the polis – because if we stop we either die or our eyes are opened. None of this analysis is exactly new in 2007; but Flanagan tenders old wisdoms about the world as though he had just now learned to utter them, in phrases familiar but somehow new-minted. Here is the doomed heroine, sliding deeper:

And then she would have to go shopping again.

She would roam the beautiful shops with their beautiful décor and beautiful shop assistants, their exquisite, thoughtful interiors marred only by their awful customers... So much beauty in service of so much that she found so ugly, so much that was hideous seeking cover, and in all the shoppers she saw only a different aspect of herself: wounded animals desperate that no one else see and know their fatal hurt.

This sort of thing goes on for page after page of the novel: the anger fresh, the language inevitably too evocative of the

rages we have felt for so many decades already, a slightly didactic tone that both dulls and alarms us: because we don't want to be lectured, but at the same time we very deeply want to learn something new. In not flinching from his task of telling us what he knows, Flanagan risks telling us what we all know; but it is a risk worth taking, in the end.

Because you can never know what you know until it is said.

But what do you do with a book like this? Easy to read, goes down like Avernum; but hard to review, because it says what we fear we “know” without ever stretching into epiphany or terminus. A bit like Brian Aldiss's *HARM* (*Interzone* 210), but Aldiss's book starts where Flanagan's leaves off, in the poison air of aftermath, and arrows forward from there. So what I do with Flanagan, I put Nick Cave on the player to remind me that not all Australians are gloomy, and sit down to say something that says Read this, because it is important for all of us to keep remembering that we are still humans and that our civil lives are

being stolen from us; but do not expect any miracles.

Except for some fairly dire coincidences – coincidences only really work if they look as though they had finally, just now, been *noticed* – the story of the Doll's doom is cleanly told. The setting is Sydney, New South Wales, in the very near future (maybe a year after the book's first publication). The Doll, whose name is Gina Davis (no connection seemingly intended with Geena Davies), is a 26-year-old pole dancer, hoarding her black earnings until she can make the down payment on a flat, a place where she can survive OK in the daze of consumption of modern Disappointment Management urban Australia, which Flanagan describes with singularly intense loathing. By a series of accidents she spends the night with a man named Tariq, who is almost immediately fingered as a terrorist. That this is a frameup, initiated by a government needing a boost in the ratings, matters not at all. The Doll immediately suffers an ultimately fatal, immensely prolonged panic attack, beautifully rendered by Flanagan, which serves to disguise from

SCORES: PLAYING GAMES JOHN CLUTE



the reader an awareness – which Flanagan might legitimately hope we never achieve – that she is supernaturally short of street smarts. Indirectly, *The Unknown Terrorist* generalises her caught-in-the-headlights helplessness as the natural posture of any citizen focused on by the creatures who run our world; which is all to the good as a long-term Big Think – but a still small voice is almost certain to whisper into most readers' ears that, hey, all she needs to do in the short term, in order to counter the swarm of media hype, is simply hire some hype of her own: she is sexy, young, Australian, witty; her only child was stillborn; the night before it all explodes in her face, she had actually refused to fuck the media shit who is now stitching her up as a terrorist; etc etc. A different novel would have focused on shame and counter-shame, and have read as just as dark as Flanagan's requiem jeremiad.

But we need to pass this by. The point of *The Unknown Terrorist* is not that another story could be told, but that any story told about the world we now pollute had might

"You do know how to reverse the data encryption, don't you?" [Benedetta asks Ivar]

"Of course. You use the roti3'd text of Odin's *Prayer in Norse*, transliterated by me into the English alphabet as the decryption key. Then you pull out the junk data I put in, which you could do if you transliterated Norse the way I do and knew where the word breaks would have been if I'd put in word breaks. Quick and dirty."

For a second, Benedetta thought that sounded too easy to break...

What is missing here is not a failure of technical plausibility, because after all Ivar is just hitting keys and stuff, I guess; what is really missing is any sense that familiarising the whole inner grammar of consciousness to an entirely new life is really any different from memorising a keyboard.

In any case, *Time's Child* soon sinks itself deep in Changewar riffs, with dozens of futures vying to win the time track game, and the novel ends in a tedious unwatered penepain of untold worlds, junk data

them, in phrases familiar but somehow new-minted...

as well be this story, which does get told fast and sharp and immensely sad. All the same, all the same. One of the Doll's sharpest utterances is a counter to the truism that Power Corrupts: maybe, she says, we corrupt power. Too bad for her she is too transfixed by panic to apply the lesson. In the end there is nothing but us.

Two Notes: It would have been good to have been able to praise Rebecca Ore's *Time's Child*, but somehow she seems to have skidded her tale right into a vagueish hard-sf limboland, where no character has any more affect than any other character, and worthiness is defined as an ability to work the gears of gear things. Story starts with two characters yanked by time machine out their eras – Benedetta is a peasant warrior who is on good terms with Leonardo da Vinci, and Ivar is a Viking on good terms with Loki – into a quasi-failed utopian America a few centuries hence. The two of them do a *Sleeper Awakes* routine with the new world, jostling it a bit; and assimilating awfully fast – this is the computer game version of *The Sleeper Awakes*, H.G. Wells:

indeed.

Ted Chiang's *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* is hardly more than a novelette, but packs into its story-within-story structure a most meticulous lesson. What the narrator learns – what the long story he tells the traditional "mighty Calif" is meant to teach – is not simply the traditional Arabian Nights lesson that you cannot sting the gods. What he finds out by passing through the Alchemist's Gate – which is essentially a time machine set to a twenty year interval – is a lot more than that. Nobody can change the universe by going back to a terrible moment and tweaking it right, the Merchant tells the Caliph. All one can do, by the grace of the god who fixes the world, is learn better what it is that happened. All one can do is come to terms. Chiang could have conveyed this lesson as a terrible prison irony (others have); the miracle of this small wise jewel of a tale is that to come to terms with the world may have more to do with repentance, atonement, and forgiveness. Those three words are the attar of the tale, and fill its final paragraph. "That is all, but that is enough." **John Clute**





Black Man (UK) / Thirteen (US)

Richard K. Morgan • Gollancz, 560pp, £14.99 hb / Del Rey, 560pp, \$24.95 hb

REVIEW/INTERVIEW/SIDEBAR by ANDREW HEDGECOCK

Much has been made of the coy US title of Richard Morgan's fifth novel, and its failure to set out the book's political stall with the same clarity as its UK equivalent. But Morgan's intention to explore the tangled nexus of technology, politics and mass psychology will be apparent to any reader who dips into the book's preliminary acknowledgements, or skims its introductory quotations from political philosopher John Gray and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.

The themes and ideas in *Black Man* intersect with those presented in Adam Curtis's recent documentary series, *The Trap*, which dissected the ruinous impact of distorted models of freedom and social justice on human nature in the years following World War II. But the world into which Morgan extrapolates these concerns is the early 22nd Century, an era in which Earth is striving to establish a colony on Mars and in which a new stability has been achieved with China as the dominant economic power. Meanwhile, America has been balkanised into three states – one of which is the ultra right-wing and deeply religious Jesusland.

**Morgan on the resurgence of faith and superstition in the 21st Century:**

It's a terrifying trend, not least for how rapidly the tables have turned. I recently watched the BBC adaptation of Iain Banks's

*Crow Road*, and Uncle Rory says, without a shred of irony, "Who cares about religion in this day and age?" That was an honest sentiment in 1996 – only ten years ago. The story also mentions the Salman Rushdie fatwa, but that is seen as a laughable barbarism, an aberration in a world of bright secular promise. Contrast that with the bull-shit we have to put up with these days. It's not just religion *per se* – you get the same kind of thing from otherwise apparently intelligent people who believe in rubbish like homeopathy, the power of crystals and the Gaia hypothesis (these people include the Prince of Wales and, apparently, John Gray, for fuck's sake). I guess there's more potential for rank stupidity in the human genome than we ever imagined. It's one thing to be ignorant: that's a circumstance that those who suffer are often powerless to change. But it's quite another to *emerge from ignorance, and then choose of your own free will to sink back into the slime*. Why? Because enlightenment is just too complicated for your poor ickle head?

The tendency to seek comfort in ignorance *can* be fought: it requires clear-sighted commitment to a set of secular humane values but everyone seems too bloody cowed or post modern to take a stand. Our very own Tony Blair, the (then) leader of a supposedly modern European state, stood up and argued schools should

have a right to teach children evolution is "just a theory" and no more respectable than the oxymoron known as "creationist thought." What's next? Re-instate prosecution for witchcraft? NHS checks to make sure your baby is not a faerie changeling? A ban on keeping black dogs as pets? Give me a fucking break!

It is 2107 and Karl Marsalis, the black man of the title, is a Variant 13 – a bio-engineered soldier-assassin genetically enhanced to possess the characteristics of hunter-gatherer alpha males, the fighting ability, physical strength and aggression that have been washed away by the tides of evolution. The Thirteens (known derisively as 'twists') were created to fight the war of the mid-21st Century, but in a period of comparative stability they are feared and detested. Marsalis avoids internment and exile to Mars by tracking down rogue Thirteens for the UN, but the cost is isolation and alienation.

The central thread of Morgan's multi-layered plot is Marsalis's hunt for a serial killer on behalf of the corporation managing the colonisation of Mars – a task he accepts as a means to liberate himself from a period of imprisonment without trial. And, as he tracks the killer through a maze of deception and manipulation, he comes to a deeper understanding of his identity and struggles against its limitations.

Morgan's portrayal of a near-future society's ambivalent attitudes to the 'twists' – once useful, now treated with suspicion – will have clear resonances in the UK and US – two societies soon to face the challenge of reintegrating men and women 'redesigned'

## 20 SF and Fantasy writers distinguished by a middle initial:

Richard K. Morgan  
Philip K. Dick  
Arthur C. Clarke  
Robert E. Howard  
Brian W. Aldiss  
Iain M. Banks  
Thomas M. Disch  
Donald A. Wollheim  
Clifford D. Simak  
Elizabeth A. Lynn

Patricia A. McKillip  
Sidney J. Bounds  
Ursula K. Le Guin  
Dennis L. McKiernan  
John T. Sladek  
Russell T. Davies  
Philip G. Williamson  
Charles G. Finney  
Neil M. Gunn  
Flann O'Brien\*

\*sorry, I was anxious about hitting my target





for military combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The narrative of *Black Man* is built on a foundation of intersecting themes relating to politics, power, identity and control. The book is crammed with social, political and technological speculation, but – in spite of a clear determination to provoke reflection on issues of social justice, empowerment and social cohesion – Morgan resists the urge to lecture.

He tackles race; social class; the tension between genetic determinism and learning; the blurred lines between co-operation and control; and the costs and benefit of 'male' and 'female' modes of thought and behaviour. But the issue addressed with a degree of clarity that would put the vast majority of political essayists to shame is the tension between individualism and conformity.

#### **Morgan on progress, power, cooperation, and conformity:**

The rank arrogance of our leaders and the rank stupidity of the people who follow them – that dynamic never ceases to appall me, and I guess to some extent, all my writing reflects this; my central characters tend to be people who have little or no faith in systems of government, and whose acts are largely destructive of already existing power structures. But at the same time – because I'm not stupid – I can see that practically everything of value in human society has been built on the back of co-operative endeavour and submission to some system of authority or another.

Simply put, conformity works. It sure ain't pretty to watch, in fact until very recently it was almost always mind numbingly brutal in application – but it's the best trick

we know as a species, and it has been the making of us. *Black Man/Thirteen* is really an attempt to plumb the depths of that contradiction, in myself and in the society I'm lucky enough to find myself a part of.

Sometimes the themes are tackled head-on in the dialogue: "*Here we are, standing in the roof garden of the cudlip success story and you're telling me no, no, you didn't take the elevator or the stairs, you just fucking flew up here all on your own, all with your own two fucking wings.*" [Cudlip = co-operative humans who have evolved away from the alpha male, hunter-gatherer model.]

But Morgan is too subtle to cram his ideas into a heavy-handed pseudo-Platonic dialogue. Like Stefano Benni in *Margherita Dolce Vita* and Janne Teller in *Odin's Island*, he tackles complex political ideas through the gaudy action and exhilarating unfamiliarity of fantasy genres. This is one of the characteristics Morgan admires in the work of Thomas Pynchon, a writer held in sufficient esteem to merit a name-check in the narrative. Morgan resists the temptation to speculate whether Pynchon will have given an interview by 2107.

#### **Morgan on Thomas Pynchon:**

What runs through Pynchon's work above all else is a passionate concern for humanity as it intersects with the modern world – he examines, almost obsessively, the impact of modern technology and modern political systems ('modern' here meaning post-Enlightenment and post-Industrial Revolution) on the human condition.

An awful lot of modern mainstream writers (and genre hacks too, come to that – think Hollywood SF) choose to view science queasily through the goggles that Mary Shelley provided us so long ago, but Pynchon is an unashamed technophile. He sees the potential of science as clearly as the inherent risks, and his viewpoint is always forward, scanning for the future.

He has a great sense of humour and isn't afraid to let it out to play. This sets him apart from most of the modern literary canon. Humour can be sadly lacking in 'literature' these days and reading Pynchon is a great antidote to all the po-faced angst and introspection. I'm also drawn to a political world view which pretty clearly chimes with my own, and a similar lack of inhibition about making unsubtle political points in the narrative. Last but not least, Pynchon cherishes a pulpish love of eventfulness for its own sake – in contrast to the anaemic lack of dynamic action in the novels of so many

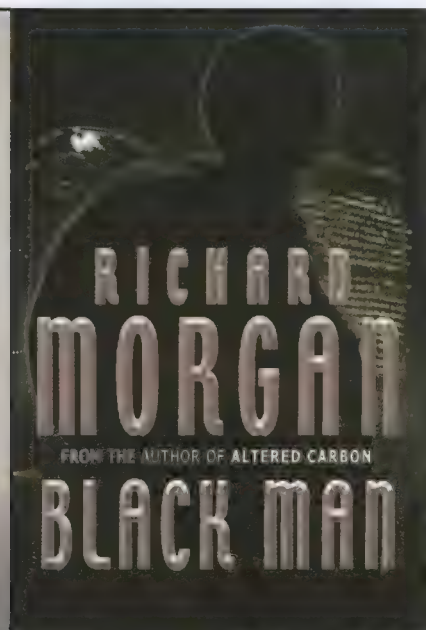
of his peers, his work overflows with chases, escapes, gun-battles, covert incursions, otherworldly visitations and lots of edgy sex. Who, with a pulse and blood that's still warm, *wouldn't* be drawn to all that?

*Black Man* is a huge book in every sense. Some readers may balk at the density of the narrative – there are inundations of ideas, complex plot twists, fragmented narrative threads and exhausting bursts of violent action. But Richard Morgan's complex story is more than worthy of the effort it demands. Provocative, observant and irrepressibly imaginative, *Black Man* remixes so many genre tropes it's impossible to define it in terms of traditional labels. There were echoes of Chandler, Gibson and Ridley Scott in the mix, but there are other – more understated – harmonies too. And if the author shows a refreshing disregard for genre conventions and a flair for utterly believable extrapolation of dystopian trends, he also shows a rare and energizing belief in the ultimate potential of people and their technologies.

#### **Morgan on cooking with additives:**

Like any decent writer, as opposed to those who were only ever in it for the money, I always wrote for myself. I was trying to produce what I wanted to read – hardboiled SF, future noir, whatever you want to call it. I was reading a lot of American crime fiction as well, which I loved, but couldn't see myself writing. I thought the real pay-off had always been in Gibson's mix of low-life, hi-tech and weary sense that whatever wonders science could come up with, humans would still see their way to fucking it up with their chimpanzee ways.

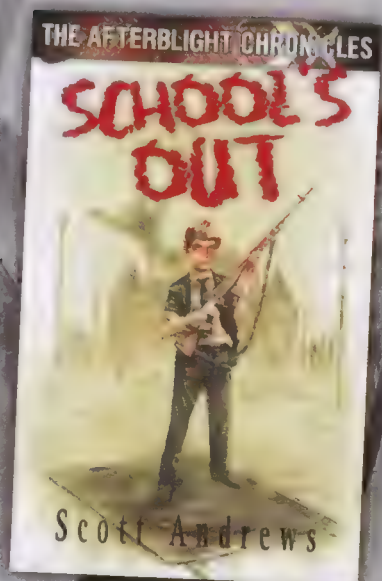
But by then Gibson had given up on hard-boiled and was moving steadily towards a sort of west coast metropolitan media cool ethos, and evidently no one was ever going to make *Bladerunner 2*. That left me at a bit of a loose end, entertainment-wise. Cyberpunk was becoming increasingly self-referential and coy, the average age of its protagonists locked in a dizzying tail-spin down towards pubescence – nothing for me there. I just wasn't interested in the gosh-wow innocence and powerlessness it implied. So I grabbed the original noir kit off the shelf and started cooking up with additives from all the old school SF I'd grown up reading. In some senses, the technological side of *Altered Carbon* owes as much to old school writers like Robert Sheckley, Poul Anderson and Bob Shaw as it ever did to cyberpunk. ☼





# THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES SCHOOL'S OUT

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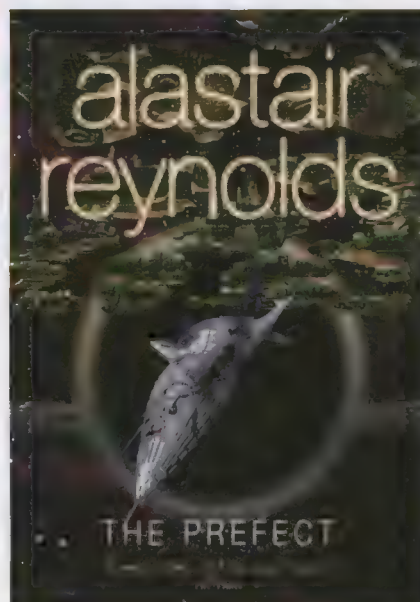
## The Prefect

Alastair Reynolds • Gollancz, \$12pp, £14.99 hb

A surprising amount of hard SF is essentially structured as a mystery: something has disturbed the familiar ordering of the universe and in the course of the novel we are presented with a series of questions and answers that eventually build into the answer to the central puzzle. It makes sense, therefore, to use the machinery of the crime story to tell us about the hard SF mystery, which is exactly what Alastair Reynolds has done in his latest venture into the universe he first visited in *Revelation Space*. There is a murder; there is a policeman who doggedly investigates despite the obstructions of his superiors; there is the patient working out of means and motive; there is the way that one set of investigations uncovers a bigger threat; there are the murky political machinations of a shadowy super-criminal; and there is the way that the plot resolves into a race against time to prevent further murders.

The whole noir alphabet is here, but of course, this is hard SF so the scale has to be different. The small and personal issue of a moral man in an immoral world cannot bear the freight of epic vision and technological grandeur that hard SF demands. So, for instance, the murder that starts this plot on its inexorable course is not of one person but of a habitat, several hundred souls dead in an instant. And our policeman is not some rough-and-ready local cop but a Prefect in a highly sophisticated force charged primarily with ensuring the smooth political running of the myriad of independent habitats that constitute the Glitter Band. (Parenthetically, let me pause to note if not decry the habit of inserting contemporary in-jokes into far-future epics. It's hard enough to have the band of habitats encircling the planet Yellowstone named after Gary Glitter's backing group, but to then find that a policeman, Prefect Tom Dreyfus's right-hand man, is literally a transformed pig is just a little too much.)

Tom Dreyfus is, of course, a cop with a secret, one that dates back eleven years to when the cops of the Glitter Band had to deal with an apparently inexplicable machine intelligence known as the Clockmaker. Everyone thought the Clockmaker had been destroyed, but now it seems he's back. Unfortunately



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the Clockmaker, implacable destroyer that he is, may not be the worst enemy that Dreyfus has to face. Because the destruction of habitat Ruskin-Sartorius turns out to be more than the act of revenge it first appears, but rather the first step in an attempt to take over the Glitter Band by the mysterious Aurora, the lone survivor of a long ago attempt to create digitally immortal humans. Dreyfus finds himself standing almost alone between these two superhuman entities, with the lives of millions at stake. His task is made no easier by a traitor in his own organisation, and by the fact that one of his trusted lieutenants is trapped on one of the first habitats taken over by Aurora.

*The Prefect* is, as this brief summary might suggest, a book that is almost overloaded with plot, though there are times when Reynolds can't quite get the pacing right, occasional longueurs when he can't kick-start the next piece of action, and a climax that is suddenly rushed. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that it is a book with more technological wonders and epic set pieces than it has characters, it is in the main a gripping action adventure that sits well with the ongoing development of this particular future universe. **Paul Kincaid**



## Death's Head

David Gunn • Bantam, 368pp, £12.99 hb

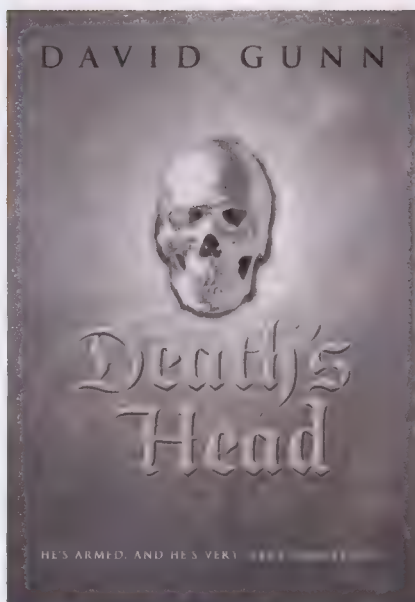
As with any sub-genre, military SF has its clichés. David Gunn's *Death's Head* ticks off pretty much all of them. Sven Tveskoeg is a rebellious hard man in a *légion étrangère* on a desert planet. About to be flogged to death, he's saved by the fortuitous attack of humanoid monsters who turn out to be handily telepathic. Since it just so happens he can help them recover a lost chieftain's skull, they don't kill him.

This is merely the first fortuitous occurrence that ensures an essentially passive hero survives and prospers through a series of loosely-connected events. He's rescued from the monsters; drafted into an elite fighting force; spends time on a prison planet; gets sent on an assassination mission. Then in an abrupt shift that jars even in the absence of a coherent narrative thread, he's defending a besieged city with the requisite raw recruits, hard-bitten mercenaries, ineffectual officers, steely-eyed foes and treachery on all sides.

This is very much a book of two halves, and for me, it was a no-score draw. Writing in first person present tense is a problematic choice for any author, only really effective when there's genuine doubt as to the central character's fate. That's a lost cause for me when lucky coincidence saves our hero twice inside the first hundred pages. If the supposed urgency of this central narrative voice is intended to engage the reader with Sven's inner character, I simply didn't find he had one. If Sven's two-dimensional, the characterisation of everyone else is paper-thin and yet awkwardly inconsistent in places. I soon found the principle role of women as perfunctory sex objects as tedious as the largely unvarying narrative pace and the by-the-numbers battle scenes. When lives are at stake, I expect to find my emotions properly engaged.

Every SF and Fantasy writer inevitably draws on predecessors in books, film and

TV. That should mean more than lifting characters, gadgets and incidents, barely bothering to file off the serial numbers



I found the principle role of women as perfunctory sex objects as tedious as the largely unvarying narrative pace and the by-the-numbers battle scenes. When lives are at stake, I expect to find my emotions properly engaged

before bolting them on. I'm simply not entertained by spotting magpie gleanings from *Star Wars* (original and new), *Stargate SG-1* and any number of old WWII movies. When reading future-military SF, I prefer a sense of coherent technology, plausible political systems and actual reasons for warfare in the background.

On the other hand, of course, clichés used with wit and self-awareness can provide a framework for insightful parody. Unfortunately I'm seeing no such satire here. Sven's black metal prosthetic arm only reminds me how I found the adventures of Bill the Galactic Hero much more entertaining and thought-provoking. There's no exploration of the human condition or broader political debate underpinning this haphazard odyssey in *Death's Head*.

Am I demanding too much? Perhaps but that's my prerogative as a reader. I like chewy books with layers of flavour and texture to savour. But there's room in the marketplace for the equivalent of a late-night kebab on the way home from a weekend unwinding session at the pub. If that's what takes your fancy, enjoy. **Juliet McKenna**

US edition also received: Del Rey, 368pp, \$24.95 hb

## Lightning Days

Colin Harvey • Swimming Kangaroo, 330pp, £10 pb

Imagine Raymond Feist's Riftwars crossed with Stephen Baxter's love of large timescales and you're starting to appreciate the story in Colin Harvey's *Lightning Days*.

There's a huge story trying to get out of these pages. A reconnaissance satellite detects an apparent massing of forces in Afghanistan and spy Cassidy is sent in to investigate at short notice. With virtually no preparation time, he takes the only troops available with him – a regiment of freshly trained soldiers, utterly unused to the harsh mountain environment. What they discover are a tribe of Neanderthals, looking for a safe haven to settle after a long journey folding themselves through many different parallel realities. But the Neanderthals' arrival is the beginning of the end for Cassidy's world...

Harvey has cherry-picked morsels of genre and carefully blended them together in *Days* – we experience many different planes of reality; travelling between them is achieved via magical and ritual; and there's espionage, romance and outright adventure thrown in too. The underlying structure is solid and plot developments arrive accompanied by inexorable logic, their combined weight gradually building to the final conclusion.

There are just two things that let the story down. The first is the blurb on the front page – by giving too much of the story away, you know what's going to happen and the first half of the book takes too long getting to the point. Which is shame because those pages are actually packed with a host of adventures as Cassidy experiences the Neanderthal history first hand.

Secondly, the passive writing style used undermines the impact of the story. The narrator's voice is distanced from the action and scenes that should have had a fierce emotional kick are delivered too matter of fact. Like when a Neanderthal is tortured and murdered: "Pagoter's death was slower and more agonizing than any torture training Cassidy had ever undergone." (53) Even taken in context in the narrative, the line delivers no sense of suffering at all.

You will find good ideas aplenty in *Lightning Days*, but you can't help but feel that it could have been so much more.

**Sandy Auden**



## Divergence

Tony Ballantyne • Tor, 328pp, £10.99 tpb

Science fiction is particularly adept at asking and answering the big questions. Such philosophical conundrums were once the sole province of religious thinkers. Tony Ballantyne's *Recursion* introduced readers to a near future where the concept of free will took a good kicking at the hands of The Watcher, an all-powerful AI born in this century that may (or may not) have ended up controlling the fate of all human kind, with the help of the perhaps mythical woman, Eva Rye. He followed *Recursion* up with *Capacity*, set in worlds both virtual and 'atomic,' once again examining the Augustinian concept of predestination, or programming as it has become in the parlance of the genre. In that novel, Ballantyne introduced Judy, an employee of The Watcher's 'Social Care,' with a dozen digital duplicates playing over variations on her life in virtual worlds. The stories of Judy and the Watcher conclude in *Divergence*, which indeed does no less than to ask and answer the biggest questions of all. If Saint Augustine were writing science fiction, we might hope it would come out as entertaining and thought provoking at these books.



The series is tightly woven, to the point where chapters from *Recursion* only get followed up in *Divergence*. Read the books in order, and don't think of them as stand-alone works. That said, each novel does function in its sort of virtual world, introducing new characters and situations and admirably allowing the reader to make the big connections. As *Divergence* begins,

we meet a group of passengers aboard the spacecraft *Eva Rye*. When they come upon what may be a robot or a spaceship, they decide to engage in a trade. In order to ensure that they aren't cheated, they engage Fair Exchange (FE) software. What they receive in return is Judy, along with orders to return her to Earth, not a choice destination. Now the passengers are trapped in series of escalating exchanges that will bring them in contact with Von Neumann Machines and things perhaps more deadly.

Ballantyne's finale to the series is properly recursive and thoroughly entertaining, even as he wrestles with the big philosophical questions about free will and predestination. The author is amazingly adept at setting up seemingly simple situations with complex consequences. Particularly interesting are Ballantyne's notions about capitalism which, when viewed with his science-fictional lens, becomes an insidious sentient computer virus. Though much of the novel is set aboard a spacecraft, the feel here is closer to Philip K. Dick than Peter F. Hamilton. Like Dick, Ballantyne is using science fiction to tread through realms that were once consecrated to religious thought. The results are entertainingly intelligent.

**Rick Kleffel**

## Helix

Eric Brown • Solaris, 480pp, £7.99 pb

In a previous interview in *Interzone*, Brian Herbert explained that he believed the decline in SF reading was due to the inaccessibility of the genre – that many readers were put off by self-referential jargon. If this is the case, then we have a saviour in Eric Brown. *Helix* is an uncomplicated SF novel, veering more towards classic space adventure and removing any need for technological jargon despite having a subject which could easily have been converted into a hard SF novel.

The story itself centres largely around two contrasting groups of entities. The first group are human colonists who have crash landed on an alien world whilst seeking a utopia, after climate change and terrorism have utterly devastated Earth. When they step out into a polar environment, their shock from the crash turns to awe at the sight they behold spiralling high above them – a huge string of land made up of thousands of cylindrical worlds spiralling

around a central sun. The revelation of their surroundings sends them on a remarkable journey up the spiral to discover a habitable region to colonise and ultimately the true meaning of the Helix itself.

The rest of the story is told from the point

of view of one of the native alien races on a cloud covered world within the Helix. A religious race, they believe they are an isolated world, alone in the Universe. Any deviation from this belief is punishable in the extreme by their seemingly tyrannical church.

With such a vivid and heart wrenching depiction of a decaying Earth in the near future, the story moves into a slightly disappointingly predictable arc of humanity seeking salvation and freedom against oppression. Despite this or perhaps because of it, Brown concentrates on stunning landscapes and in the way he conveys the conflicting points of view between races. Flicking between perspectives and keeping the language barriers of each species in place, means that no matter how familiar each character becomes, they continue to appear completely alien when viewed through the opposing set of eyes. Brown has a casual and unpretentious style and although some hard SF fans expecting deep scientific detail could pick holes in the plausibility of much of the story, the accessibility, the tenderness between characters and more importantly the scale of wonder involved are what makes this highly enjoyable escapism. **Kevin Stone**





## Reaper's Gale

Steven Erikson • Bantam, 509pp, £12.99 pb

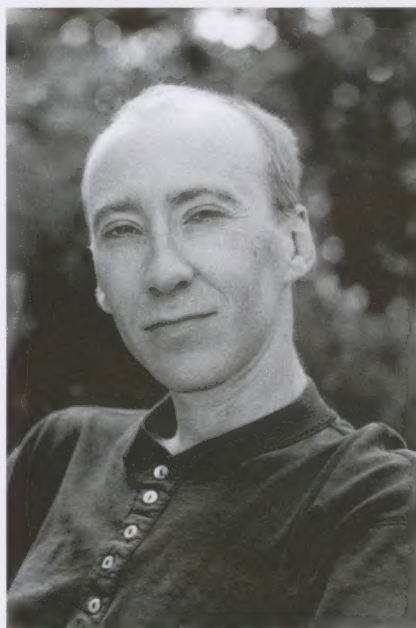
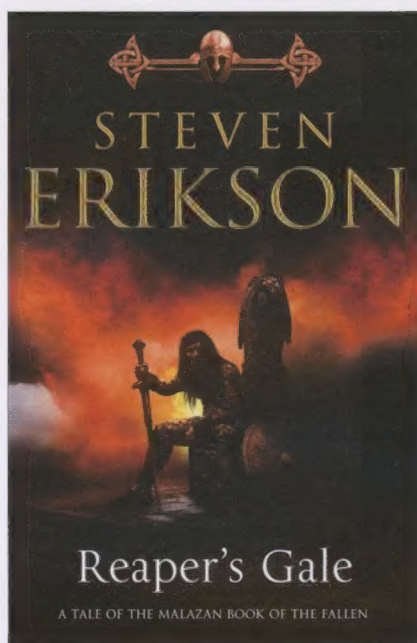
With the release of *Reaper's Gale*, the seventh novel in his Malazan Book of the Fallen series, Steven Erikson takes us away from the Malazan Empire and back to the crumbling empire of Letheras that we were first introduced to in *Midnight Tides*. The immortal and increasingly insane emperor, Rhulad Sengar, still rules in name, but he has been isolated from his Tiste Edur by the machinations of his human chancellor. Meanwhile, a new secret police force, the Patriotists, roams the streets, brutally crushing dissent.

Into that unstable situation come the unstoppable Toblakai warrior, Karsa Orlong, and Icarium, the half-Jaghut with no memory of his past and enough power to destroy the world. Rebellion rises in the empire's border colonies; Tehol Beddict steps up his scheme to single-handedly collapse the Letherii economy; and the battered Malazan 14<sup>th</sup> army arrive on the shores of Letheras, intent on a punitive invasion. Meanwhile, Silchas Ruin, released from millennia of imprisonment at the end of *Midnight Tides*, searches for the soul of his old enemy, the Tiste Edur ascendant, Scabandari Bloodeye.

Erikson's novels have fast been redefining the definition of 'epic'. With stories whose origins reach back hundreds of thousands of years, dozens of intersecting storylines and hundreds of characters, these novels are some of the most ambitious and imaginative works of fantasy of recent years. With every book, the layers have grown more complex, assumptions have been reversed and previous actions re-evaluated.

*Reaper's Gale*, along with *Midnight Tides*, is probably Erikson's most humorous novel. While Erikson has always used understated humour, particularly among his soldiers, the combination of Tehol Beddict and his manservant, Bugg, gives him the platform for genuinely funny exchanges. It is also his most political novel. Letheras is an ultra-capitalist, expansionist empire. The critiques delivered by some of its opponents are devastating, and its fall inevitable.

Steven Erikson is sometimes seen as a rather unforgiving writer. He rarely reminds the reader of previous events, expecting you to remember them instead; and he never explains character motivations, preferring to demonstrate them through their actions. If all of that makes *Reaper's Gale* sound dry



or hard-going, it isn't. Like all the Malazan novels, this is a book full of assassins, mages, politics, intrigue, humour, intense action, vivid characters and a completely original take on magic. Erikson specialises in weaving plot threads into explosive climaxes, convergences of vast power that leave the participants devastated and the balances of power disrupted.

If you've never read a Malazan novel before, *Reaper's Gale* probably isn't the place to start. If you have, you should get this as soon as possible, and re-immense yourself in one of the most original and engrossing fantasy series of recent times.

**Stephanie Burgis**







## MANGAZONE: TECHNOLOGY VERSUS TRADITION SARAH ASH

**I**kki, the swaggering, precocious hero of **Air Gear**, lives with the four Noyamano sisters. Every day he watches a mysterious girl, Simca, performing gravity-defying stunts on her Air Trecks, the must-have battery-powered roller skates which enable the most gifted users to 'fly'. Ikki is smitten. But little does he know that in going in pursuit of Simca and a pair of Air Trecks of his own, he will become a trespasser in the dangerous World of Night. Drawn into a series of increasingly epic race-duels, Ikki is driven to battle to overcome impossible odds to win the coveted badges of this hidden world and seek out the legendary team known as 'The Sleeping Forest'.

*Air Gear* is a dazzlingly exuberant manga by the cheekily-named mangaka Oh!great (we're told that this is how his real name, Ogure Ito, sounds to Western ears). Oh!great is already notorious for the blisteringly violent fights and scantily-clad heroines (not so much 'panty', as 'no panty shots') in his break-out manga *Tenjiho Tenge*.

*Air Gear* is aimed at a young *shonen* audience, although Del Rey still class it as 16+ and deliver it shrink-wrapped, a sure sign that the publishers think that there's 'unsuitable content for younger readers' inside. Odd too, given the 16+ label, that its hero is described as thirteen! So why does it merit its 16+ label and shrink-wrapping? Fan service; the four sisters are frequently portrayed naked in the bath so that interested readers can check out their pneumatic credentials. But such gratuitous

pictures go with the territory these days. More disturbing is the brutal and humiliating punishment meted out to Ikki by a rival gang. When they eventually leave him, half-naked and battered, he picks up his bike to try to ride home, only to see it fall apart. His face crumples and he breaks down in tears. It's a truly moving moment which gains sympathy for the tough, cocksure boy known as 'Babyface'.

With colourful and grotesque characters, a likeable hero and bucket-loads of technical Air Trek details to please even the most obsessive fan, *Air Gear* is uncompromising in its portrayal of gang warfare – and brilliantly, breathtakingly drawn.

Oh – and there's not only an anime TV series, there's been a live musical version in Tokyo!

For all the fanfares that preceded its publication in translation, award-winning **Mushishi** is as subtle and muted as *Air Gear* is brash and hyperactive. Yuki Urushibara has also invented a fascinating mythos of her own, rooted in Japanese folklore, yet with a horror-driven science-fictional sensibility. 'Some live in the deep darkness behind your eyelids. Some eat silence. Some thoughtlessly kill. Some drive you mad. Shortly after life emerged from the primordial ooze, these deadly creatures, *mushi*, came into terrifying being.'

Ginko, the cigarette-smoking 'mushishi' or 'mushi-master', moves through rural Japan, listening to people's stories and

acting as an exorcist-healer. Each chapter is a separate tale: 'The Green Gathering', 'The Soft Horns', 'The Light in the Eyelids', 'The Travelling Bog'. Sometimes Ginko is able to help those he meet who have been affected by *mushi*, sometimes, as in 'The Pillow Path', his efforts to help go tragically wrong. The nameless man who seeks his help has premonitions when he dreams, so Ginko gives him medicine. But when Ginko returns to the village, he finds it deserted and overgrown. Only the dreamer has survived, alone and wretched. 'If I'm the cause of all this tragedy,' he demands, 'why the hell did you keep me alive?' Only now has he realised that the *mushi* within him are making his dreams come true.

'Imenonoawai. They live within the host's dreams...but there are times when they come out of dreams,' Ginko tells him. 'Then...they emerge from the host

to become an open Petri dish that infects reality.'

In his desperation, the man slashes open his pillow, believing it to be the path used by the *mushi* to infect his mind – with devastating and surprising consequences. Later, Ginko reflects, 'The word for pillow 'makura' is made from combining the words for "Storage place" and "soul". *Between dreams and reality is the storage place of the soul*.'

Urushibara's images of the Japanese landscape are nostalgic and atmospheric: soft snow scenes, remote villages untouched by today's technology, the delicate watercolours on the cover, all are imbued with an ominously disconcerting sense of the numinous. Her style of storytelling is understated, yet no less resonant for its muted tone. 'It feels like an era between the Edo and Meiji periods,' she says in her Afterword, although Ginko is often depicted in jeans and T-shirt.

As each story is complete in itself, with little sense of progression, my only concern is that the series might never develop beyond a 'mushi of the week' scenario, unless Urushibara goes on in future volumes to reveal a little more about Ginko, her enigmatic central character. Perhaps, though, that won't seem so important as the reader is gently seduced by the unique quality of her drawing and story-telling.

**Air Gear** is translated and adapted by Makoto Yukon for Del Rey and Tanoshimi. **Mushishi** is translated and adapted by William Flanagan for Del Rey.



# CLIVE BARKER

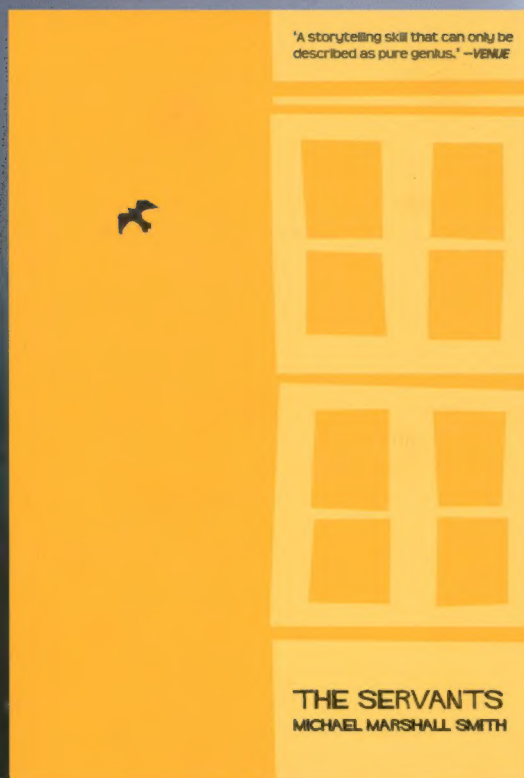
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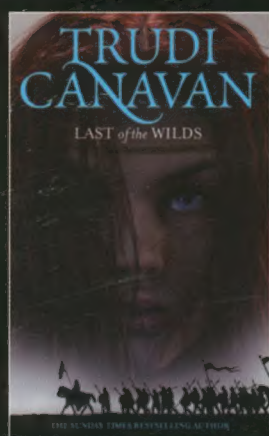
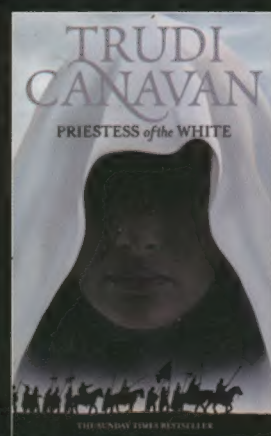
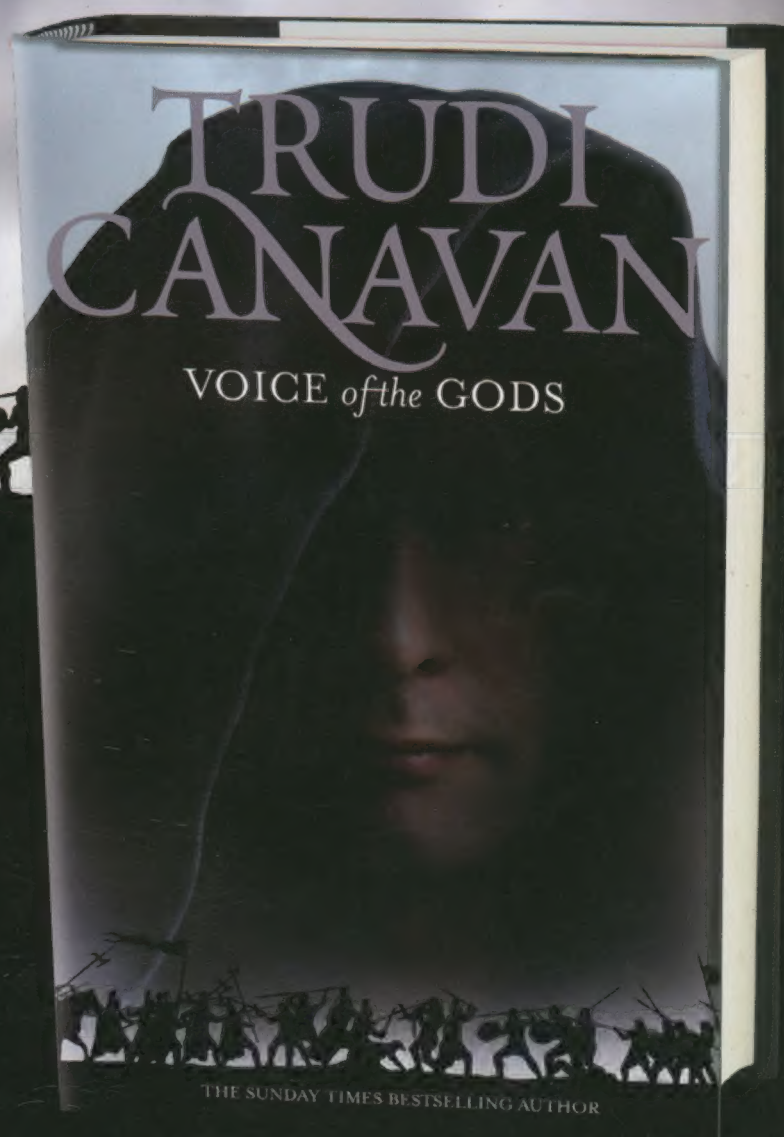
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